

BRITAIN'S LONGEST RUNNING SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

INTERZONE

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

ISSUE 203

Among the Living

KAREN FISHLER

plus new stories by

ELIZABETH BEAR • PAUL DI FILIPPO

JAY LAKE • RICHARD CALDER & others

Life, Death & Whelkus Titanicus
according to NEAL ASHER



David Langford's Ansible Link
John Clute on Stephen King
Nick Lowe's Mutant Popcorn

WHERE THE WILD GIRLS ARE
K.J. BISHOP INTERVIEWED

APRIL 2006

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NEW SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES BOOKS MANGA



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EDITORIAL

There are a couple of changes to the *Interzone* staff to report... Firstly Book Reviews Editor Iain Emsley (right) is stepping down in order to concentrate more on other things, not the least of which is expanding his online bookshop Aust Gate (austgate.co.uk). Our heartfelt thanks to Iain for all that he's done the last eighteen months. Iain will be replaced by Sandy Auden (right right, and always right), and over the next few issues we should see her influence really take hold.

Also stepping down is co-editor Peter Tennant, for reasons very similar to Iain's. It isn't possible to do justice here to the work Pete's put into *Interzone* since issue 194, not just reading and editing stories but offering valuable advice on every other aspect of the magazine, inside and out, a lot of it beyond the call of duty. There aren't many people around as knowledgeable and wise – and patient! – as Pete, and his editorial input will be sorely missed. Not that he's gone completely, as he's still doing a bit of sharp proofreading and still offering us some advice every now and then ("You really need to *stop* calling me").

Apart from that *Interzone* has had a good time of it lately. We have several stories shortlisted for various prestigious awards and selected for reprint in various Year's Best anthologies. Complete list next time.

We've also been increasing the magazine's distribution. Warners have ensured that we are sending more copies into the UK trade, and we have just signed up with Ubiquity and Diamond which should see more copies going into US newsagents, bookshops and comic shops. Early days yet, but we'll keep you updated.

It took a bit longer than usual for issue 202 to arrive overseas. We tried a different service and it didn't quite work out as we expected, even though delivery was apparently still quicker than the worldwide average for fiction magazines. We're assured that future mailings will be more like we, and you, are used to. Let us know on the forum (ttapress.com/discus).



AS OTHERS SEE US

More about how *Battlestar Galactica* (above) is so very different: 'It's sci-fi, yes, but there are no aliens; there are androids, but they look just like us and are fervently religious; and both the best fighter pilot and the president are women. In other words, the conventions of sci-fi are borrowed only to be subverted...' (*Radio Times*, 7–13 Jan)

New Year Honours. Of just two fiction writers honoured, one has written fantasy: Jeanette Winterson, OBE. Another OBE, for drama, went to Robbie Coltrane – whose acting career now tends to be summarized as 'Hagrid in the Harry Potter films'.

Ursula Le Guin reveals all! *Interviewer*: 'If you weren't a writer what would you be?' *Le Guin*: 'Dead.' (*BellaOnline*)

Iain Banks was typecast yet again for *Celebrity Mastermind* (BBC1, January), where he answered questions on that profoundly Cultured subject 'Malt Whisky and the Distilleries of Scotland'. And won.

No Fun. Asked what he wished people would take more notice of, TV presenter Alex Zane said: 'Science fiction as a prophetic source of information and not a source of entertainment.' (*Independent*, 21 Jan)

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

AWARD SHORTLISTS

Arthur C. Clarke: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*; Ken MacLeod, *Learning the World*; Alastair Reynolds, *Pushing Ice*; Geoff Ryman, *Air*; Charles Stross, *Accelerando*; Liz Williams, *Banner of Souls*.

Philip K. Dick: Neal Asher, *Cowl*; M.M. Buckner, *War Surf*; Karin Lowachee, *Cagebird*; Justina Robson, *Natural History*; Justina Robson again, *Silver Screen*; Wil McCarthy, *To Crush The Moon*.

BSFA novel finalists: Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *9Tail Fox*; Charles Stross, *Accelerando*; Geoff Ryman, *Air*; Ken MacLeod, *Learning the World*; Justina Robson, *Living Next Door to the God of Love*.

Clive James, writing on 'sludge fiction', remembers 'the classically awful British television SF series *Blakes Seven*: no apostrophe in the title, no sense in the plot. The depraved space queen Servalan, played by the slinky Jacqueline Pearce, could never quite bring herself to volatilize the dimly heroic Blake even when she had him square in the sights of her plasmatic spasm guns. The secret of Blake's appeal, or Blakes appeal, for the otherwise infallibly fatale Servalan remained a mystery, like the actual wattage of light bulb on which the design of Blake's spaceship, or Blakes spaceship, was plainly based.' (*TLS*)

David Lammy, our Minister for Culture, may not know much about Art but he knows what he doesn't like. His opening words when presenting the 2005 Turner Prize (awarded to the DIY conversion of an old shed by laborious stages into an old shed): 'I don't care who wins, as long as it's not *Lord of the Rings*.'

Steven Spielberg's rep Marvin Levy on rumours of an SS plan to remake *Mary Poppins*: 'I never heard of this and couldn't imagine Steven ever doing a remake of a classic – and a [Walt Disney] classic at that.' What of *War of the Worlds* (2005)? Was

Hook (1992) totally unconnected with that 1953 Disney classic *Peter Pan*?

The Horror! The Horror! A devout US website exposes 'the darker and esoteric meanings of the *Chronicles of Narnia*', including the author's vile profanity: 'The word "ass" appears in four of the books. Being British, it probably did not mean the same to him as it does to Americans (as a swear word), but he could have left it out, especially since he only used it four times and did use "donkey" in other places. However, considering the filthy state of his mind, it is possible that he thought this cute.' Other parts of this analysis are, um, less balanced.

Maureen McHugh has a problem that's shared by many fellow sf authors, explains Seattle librarian Nancy Pearl: 'The thing about Maureen McHugh is you're going to find her shelved in the science fiction and fantasy section. And that's unfortunate.'

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Dept of Nose Noises. 'But the younger man had a nose for trouble which Acevedo had learned to trust, or at least listen very carefully to.' (David Weber in *Changer of Worlds*, 2001) • 'He whispered under his nose.' (Greg Vilk, *Golem*, 2005)

Dept of Complex Mapping. 'However erroneous the theory upon which the cartographers evolved their maps, mine were not entirely useless; though they required considerable mental mathematical gymnastics to translate them into usable information...the actual and the apparent measurements of distance can be reconciled by multiplying each by the square root of minus one!' (Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Escape on Venus*, 1946)

David Langford's latest book is *The SEX Column and Other Misprints*, collecting his *SFX* magazine columns and features. Cosmos Books, 244pp, \$17.95 pb (www.wildsidepress.com). More details can also be found at ansible.co.uk/books/sexcol.html

R.I.P.

George Bernau (1945–2005), US author of such alternate-history thrillers as *Promises to Keep* (1988) – featuring life after Dallas for J.F. Kennedy – died on 12 December; he was 60.

Kenneth Bulmer (1921–2005), old-time UK fan and prolific author, died on 16 December aged 84. Ken loomed large in my own map of sf as the guest of honour at my first convention, the first editor to buy a Langford story (for *New Writings*), and a genially encouraging presence at UK Milford workshops. Besides copious sf/fantasy under his own name, Ken wrote in many genres – his personal favourite being the Hornbloweresque 'Fox' naval adventures, as by Adam Hardy. His longest-running success was the Kregen or Dray Prescott sequence of science fantasies in the vein of Edgar Rice Burroughs, bylined Alan Burt Akers and, later, Dray Prescott. Although the US publisher (DAW) stopped at 38 books, this series continued in German translation until #53. Ken's total output was enormous; Steve Holland calculates that the recent comics reprint *The Steel Claw: The Invisible Man* is his 189th book. A tireless worker and a thoroughly nice man.

'Big-Hearted' Howard DeVore (1925–2005), long-time US fan, convention organizer, book dealer, and editor of *History of the Hugo, Nebula and International [later World] Fantasy Awards*, died on 31 December aged 80.

Maurice Dodd (1922–2005), who wrote – and from 1983 to 1992 also drew – the *Daily Mirror* 'Perishers' cartoon strip which gave sf the catchphrase 'Eyeballs in the Sky', died on 31 December; he was 83.

Kenneth Macksey (1923–2005), author and editor of books of what-if speculation like *The Alternate History of the German Invasion of England, July 1940* (1980) died on 30 November.

Jan Mark (1943–2006), UK author of many acclaimed children's books, died on 15 January. Her sf novels were *The Enmead* (1978), its sequel *Divide and Rule* (1979), and *Aquarius* (1982).

Fred Pfeil (1949–2005), US author of the notable sf novel *Goodman 2020* (1986) died on 29 November.

J.N. (Jerry) Williamson (1932–2005), US horror author and editor of the 'Masques' anthologies (1984–1991), died on 8 December aged 73.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW › WHERE THE WILD GIRLS ARE › K.J. BISHOP INTERVIEWED by RICHARD CALDER



K.J. BISHOP

KJ. Bishop is the author of the widely acclaimed *The Etched City* (2003) and winner of the William L.

Crawford Award for Best First Novel, the Ditmar Award for Best Novel and the Ditmar Award for Best New Talent. Furthermore, she was on the list for the 2005 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and has also been nominated for the World Fantasy Award, the Aurealis Award and the International Horror Guild Award.

She lives in Melbourne and spends her time working on a new book, honing her body in the gym, attending masked balls, plotting unspeakable blasphemies and living by her favourite quote (from André Gide): 'Look for your own. Do not do what someone else could do as well as you. Do not say, do not write what someone else could say, could write as well as you. Care for nothing in yourself but what you feel exists nowhere else. And, out of yourself create, impatiently or patiently, the most irreplaceable of beings.'

Interview by Richard Calder

WHERE THE WILD GIRLS ARE

A certain archetype informs your fiction, a dark animus figure whose avatars include Gwynn (*The Etched City*) and Alsiso and Maldoror (who feature in two of your short stories). When did you first encounter him?

One of my earliest memories is of teenage boys playing football (Aussie Rules) in a park near where I lived. I don't know how accurate the actual visual memory is, but when I picture them now I see lithe, shaggy-haired 70s kids in tight jeans and t-shirts, all adolescent androgyny and casual machismo. They fascinated me. Of course, I wanted to go and play with them. I think that was the first time I wanted to be something other than myself. I really wanted to become one of those wonderfully agile, loud, unsupervised creatures. That's how I first met my animus, I think.

The fact that I was a Young Lady, and that because of this a certain sort of unnaturally charming and decorous behaviour was expected, was made very clear to me at school and by my mother at home. Obedience was the watchword. Naturally I sided (if only in my imagination) with larrikins and reprobates (as, in fact, and in secret, did my mother). I tended to project my fantasies of mischief and mayhem onto male alter egos. I was surrounded by rather tyrannical women and I think I imagined that only a man – a well-armed, well-trained man – could defeat them. Once I was out of their clutches I retrospectively admired those women. They were hardy amazons in a man's world. And my dark animus tends to admire them, too – and knows that he really stands little chance against them.

Your muse-figure – who you so often realize as a gentleman barbarian or dark, dangerous, romantic fellow in jackboots – was then the imaginative extension of an otherwise powerless little girl. All imaginative power is located – or so I believe – in childhood. (Let the artist who too earnestly wishes to grow up

beware!) So let me ask you: Was there some stage when your muse assumed an identity of his own, became a guide to the fantasy life and thereby pointed the way towards writing?

It would have been when I was between twelve and fourteen. I had a couple of female alter egos, but they weren't muses as such. The first identity the male figure assumed was quite a simple childhood power fantasy. He was a sort of black knight, a spiritual bodyguard with no inconvenient scruples. As I got older and began to get a taste of adult independence he also gained some freedom, because I didn't need him to be that sort of single-minded warrior anymore – though he never lost his penchant for violence. His identity changed and grew branches over the years, intermittently merging with other characters I took a fancy to – Maldoror being one – so that he ended up having numerous selves, with different names. I used to write descriptions of him, but only static portraits. It was probably in the Maldoror phase that he got a voice and will of his own. That was when writing really began to appeal to me. The mysterious sense of listening to people from another world, like the people in dreams, who seem quite independent in that dreamworld, with lives and ideas of their own, is, for me, the active ingredient in the writing drug. I find it quite hard to write without that sense of inflow from another place.

The muse was an outsider, a pariah?

He always remained an outsider in some sense: either not at all socially integrated, or integrated in a problematic way where it's only some sort of dysfunction in society at large that lets him have a legitimate place. As Alsiso, and in the borrowed guise of Maldoror, he's out on the margins of life. As Gwynn, he moves from an environment that rejects him to one that accommodates him – though at a cost. That goes back to childhood again, I'm sure, and the to-ing and fro-ing as the young individual

wrestles with the world and faces those fears that pull you in opposite directions, the fear of being hated by the world and the fear of drowning in it.

In *The Etched City* your central female protagonist, Raule, has had a long-term, on-off relationship with Gwynn. They are friends, however, not lovers. And theirs is a friendship both deep and problematic. I've often wondered what constitutes their mutual, if often begrudged, need for each other. For Raule, Gwynn seems a physical correlative of the wildness that fundamentally underpins her inner life and that is necessary for her survival. Are you a wild girl too, K.J. Bishop?



I'm like Max in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. I visit the land of the Wild Things and come home in time for supper. I like to have fun, but I don't go to extremes. I don't want to die young. I plan to cut loose when I'm old: once I'm over 80 I'm going to live on LSD and gin.

I went to a private school with shades of St Trinian's. The wilder girls there fascinated me, but they belonged to another world. I was far too nerdy for them. My main escapes were art and ice-skating. I took figure skating lessons for a while, and I know this sounds lame, but to me that was wild, because the usual physical rules of getting around on two feet didn't apply.

And I was into those old Lobsang Rampa books – I had a fun time believing in them for a few years. I wanted to learn to astral travel so that my spirit could scoot around the universe. I wanted to fly into the gas giants and the sun. I still want to do that. I think that's a fairly wild ambition.

The word that most often comes to mind when I think of you is 'elegance'. Your prose is lush, but at the same time disciplined: chaos under the whip. What arbiter elegantiarum – that is, what writerly principle – did you discover, learn from and adopt on the road to *The Etched City* that gave you the ability to infuse language with such a refined but indisputably erotic charge?

Blame my grade five English teacher, Mrs Ryan. She made a big impression on me. She had been an Olympic hurdler – she

was our P.E. teacher, too – and you could say that she took an athletic approach to writing. She encouraged us to write using the awareness of the whole body. She taught us that language can give voluptuous pleasure, both through virtual sensory experience through immersive description and via abstract elements of word choice and sentence shape. That wasn't how she put it, of course, but she got those ideas across. And she encouraged us to be perfectionists. You could always find a stronger, more efficient, or more beautiful word or phrase. Down at that detailed level is still where I'm most disciplined and try hardest; at the big-picture level of narrative I'm lazier, or maybe just less able by nature. I can't imagine myself ever writing a trilogy or a long series with a lot of narrative threads.

I think that for me the act of writing is a kind of lovemaking; it comes from

the libido. It's an intellectual variant of the primitive biological urge to create something, along with the even more primitive urge to interact intimately with whatever you can swap genetic material with – only with writing, the material isn't genetic, it's memetic. I don't always try to make language erotic, but I'm interested in the mechanics of how one does make it so. Obviously it's easier if you're writing about something of a sensual nature, where the body is involved, be it actual sex, or fighting, or eating, or clothes, or whatever; but just considering it as an abstract thing, language is always excessive; just to name something is to lay an excess of meaning on it, but when language is used in ways you don't hear everyday the excessiveness increases. It goes beyond the realm of necessity and becomes a display, a means of seduction. But, undisciplined excess, while it can be beautiful and fun, isn't erotic – or I don't find it so. There needs to be a counterforce, something controlling the energy, squeezing it, directing it. In the tension between the chaotic libidinal energy and the controlling force is where, I think, an erotic charge has the potential to grow.

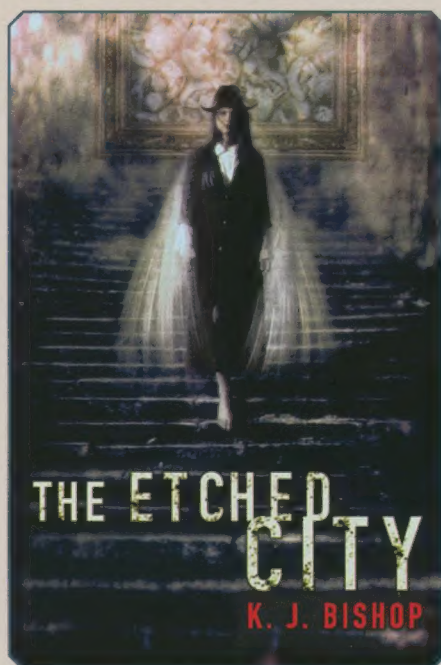
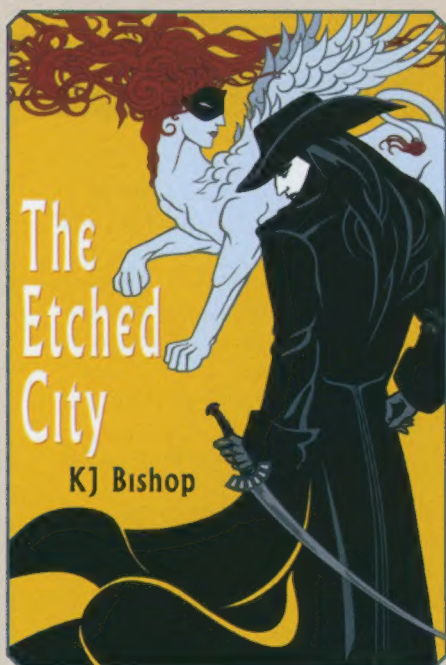
A.N. Wilson has said that 'the carelessness for safety...is often the ingredient of an artist's career. The capacity to let rip, to let go.' Does becoming a writer, for a woman, involve (at least in some part) a rejection of womanhood, or of certain notions of womanhood – such as maternity, domesticity and, perhaps, a concomitant docility – and the embrace of an inner *Puella Aeternus*?

There are women for whom writing is a guilty pleasure because they see it as selfish. It's probably a guilty pleasure for some men, too – men who can hear a paternal voice saying, 'Son, stop daydreaming and go and make some money'.

But when you go beyond that level of fear and think about the act of writing itself, I don't see maternity and domesticity being at odds with artistic creation. If anything, I see parallels. For me, a piece of writing is a bit like a child, in that it has its own identity, and it doesn't really belong to me,

"I'm like Max in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. I visit the land of the Wild Things and come home in time for supper"





The cover of the Prime edition (left) of *The Etched City* was by K.J. Bishop herself. The UK edition is published by Tor (336pp, £7.99 pb). Link: www.kjbishop.net

but I have to nurture it and guide it. And domesticity is about creating a little world, making it aesthetically coherent, keeping it tidy – so there's a parallel with writing there, too: whether you're scrubbing out a stain on the carpet or polishing a paragraph, it's the same attitude.

Do we still associate docility with womanhood? I suppose we do, though in a different way than we used to. Nowadays we're supposed to docilely allow ourselves to be shaped into aggressive, self-serving careerists. We're meant to be good soldiers; it's a masculine sort of docility that our leaders seem to want from us these days. But as for the old-fashioned sort of female docility, I wonder how real it ever was. Perhaps it was just that women's passions went unspoken and were therefore believed nonexistent by the male pundits who came up with all these notions of woman; or it may have just been exhaustion from too many kids and too much housework.

As for the *Puella Aeternus*, I can't speak for all women writers, only for myself, but yes, I do have an inner whore – or perhaps not exactly a whore, but an adventuress. Going back to writing as sex, I would say that my writing self wants to fuck, and be fucked by, the whole universe – not in the narrow sense of sex as we think of it, but in a broader way. She wants to embrace characters, objects, language, moods

– whatever's out there. She's completely promiscuous.

Your fictional characters are outsiders. If you were to form, or find yourself elected to, a company of renegade sisters, who might we be expected to discover on the membership list, and who would you blackball, and why?

Number one on the list of invitees would be my mother. She always wanted to be a rebel – and she is one, in her own way; but I think she'd appreciate the chance to really cut loose. I'd have the pirates Mary Read and Anne Bonney, of course, so that we could go marauding at sea. Our captain would be Mary Bryant, a convicted highway robber who escaped from Botany Bay with her husband, their kids and some other convicts and managed to sail north as far as Timor, evading cannibals en route. (Her husband died en further route to execution in England, but the English press loved Mary and eventually she and her surviving shipmates were pardoned.) Big Nose Kate would have to be in the gang, and we couldn't exclude Lola Montez, even though I imagine she'd be difficult to get along with. Isabelle Eberhardt would be our resident mystic, and I hope Jane Digby el Mezrab would find room in her busy schedule to spend some time with us. Of the living, besides my mother, the first sister

who springs to mind is Germaine Greer: I don't always agree with her, but she's a stirrer, and every gang needs a stirrer – not to mention a reliable voice of conscience, and she'd be that, too. I could go on, but those are a few for starters! I wouldn't blackball anyone, though traitors would be marooned in the traditional manner.

In a prose poem W.H. Auden addresses his 'wound' in the language of a lover, thanking it for the gift of insight. ('Knowing you,' he says, 'has made me understand'.) And Edmund Wilson uses the phrase 'the wound and the bow' to express the idea of the sickness present in each artist which yet bestows power. (The Greek warrior Philoctetes lived in isolation because of the disgusting odour of his suppurating wound but was sought out by his countrymen because they had need of his skill and magically unerring bow.) What is your wound, K.J. Bishop?

I don't think I have any sort of unique wound, just the usual skinned knees and elbows that you garner as you bump along through life. I think it's worth noting that Auden was writing about forbidden (in his case homosexual) love. That sort of pain – the wound of impossible or difficult love, be it forbidden, unrequited, or that peculiar fairy-struck love some of us have for phantoms of the mind – can be a great source of creative power, because it makes the lover reach for the beloved, and art is the means of reaching. It's a funny thing – sometimes writing can keep a wound open, and sometimes it can close it, suddenly cutting you off from the painful power source. But inspiration doesn't have to come from pain; it can come from joy. One of my favourite books is Andre Gide's *Fruits of the Earth*, which is written from the position of a person who has recovered from illness and is reawakening to the pleasures of life. One can be content, recovered, healed, and still passionate; the memory of having been hurt, or brushed by death, can stoke up the creative fires, inspire artistic passion, as part of the lust for life, without having to leave the wound open and dripping. I suppose you could argue that joy – intense joy or rapture – itself involves a kind of wound, or at least a breach, because it's a deep touch, a stroking or tickling of the heart.

Thank you, K.J. Bishop. Now. Let the wild rumpus start...

INTERMISSION

STORIES • THE FURTHEST SCHORR: 32 FUGUES ON THE PAINTINGS OF TODD SCHORR by PAUL DI FILIPPO

THE HUNTER-GATHERER

1 The hominid named Gra had to chew the skins for several days to get them supple enough to form the sack. His big blunt teeth and wide parabola of jaw began to ache. But he persisted. No effort could be spared for the all-important hunt, the first of its kind. Fashioning the bone sewing needle occupied another half-day, as did cleaning the animal intestines to form thread.

During this period he subsisted on carrion, too preoccupied to track new game. He grew sick from the tainted meat. His mate, Reh, brought him some of the fleshy stalks that grew in the swamp, a plant which had cured his distress once before. But finally, after all the work and illness, he was ready.

Warily, he approached the site where the odd, unclean strangers in their outlandishly textured furs had once camped, before vanishing in a whirlpool of shimmering air. They had scattered debris over a wide area before leaving, and the bright colors and half-recognizable shapes of the abandoned objects hypnotized him. The slick surfaces of the figurines that resembled his fellow tribes-people in the oddest, most disturbing ways seemed to impart knowledge through Gra's skin. One by one, he began to pick up the objects and store them in his sack, his muscle-corded arms, veins in bas-relief, almost too powerful for the delicate task assigned them.

By mid-day he was feeling faint, possibly from the lingering effects of the bad meat, but also possibly from the collective mojo of his prizes. And then, as he stooped for one last trophy, dizziness washed over him. The air swirled in chromatic pinwheels similar to the whirlpool that had taken the strangers away.

Two of the figures – a black and red mouse and a pregnantly voluptuous woman with a beehive for a head – came to life atop a pedestal of untainted fresh kill, and orchestrated noises unlike any he had ever heard filled his ears. Something never before felt was born inside him. Gra fell to his knees – to pray.

And how much will you be contributing today to the fund for new stained-glass windows, Mr Jones?

SUGAR SHAKES

2 The pentagram was outlined in Kool-Aid powder. The candles were stacks of pierced Necco Wafers with licorice-whip wicks. The sacrifice was a beheaded chocolate Easter Bunny. Solid, not hollow.

Little Kenny Firazzy was ready to invoke his own peculiar demons.

Butt-naked, smeared with strawberry syrup, a necklace of candy skulls draped across his bony, ten-year-old chest, Kenny began to chant the evil invocation he had learned from collecting enough Bazooka Bubblegum comics.

"Skittles and Kitkats and hyperglycemia! Gummis and Starbursts and sweets that are dreamier!"

The chant took a full five minutes to recite. But when he finished, Kenny knew he had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.

Confined in the pentagram, three demons hovered: Cottonwisp, Bad Apple and Beninjeri. Vainly did they writhe to be free, uttering seductive promises and lies. Their tails lashed, their fluids oozed, their worm-tongues flickered. But Kenny had been too smart for their wiles. They were trapped, and forced to accept his commands.

"Listen you three," Kenny ordered, "I wanna have all the world's sweet stuff, all the time, anytime I want it! And for starters, I'll take a nice big serving of chocolate milk."

"Your wish," hissed the three demons, "is our command."

The bioengineered cow crashed through the roof, landed on Kenny and squashed him flatter than a Fruit Rollup. Chocolate milk dribbled from its teats. The pentagram dispersed upon impact, and the demons were freed.

They went straight back to their home in the innermost circle of sugar hell: Hershey, Pennsylvania.

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL TAUNG BABY

3 The aliens picked Lena Wilkinson up in 1951, right in the middle of a photo session with Irving Klaw. A flock of horrible little creatures with heads like partially deflated, mushroom-textured balloons, riding in glittery Formica saucers. They couldn't fit her lingerie-clad form into their tiny one-alien cruisers, of course, so they had enveloped her in some kind of translucent protective protoplasm, zapped Klaw and his crew with their amnesia ray, and towed Lena off with gravity waves behind their mini-fleet as they soared out into space.

That envelope of protoplasm eventually became her only friend.

The trip across the lightyears involved passage down an infinite helical tunnel tinted a bilious yellow-green and studded at intervals with slate-colored exit portals. The fleet eventually dove down one exit and emerged above a hospitable planet, where they dumped Lena.

The protoplasm shivered off her and coalesced into a small bulbous luminescent starfish-shaped entity.

"Lena, I'm your new companion, Rollo. Follow me to your new home. We have a lot of learning and fucking to do."

Still clad only in underwear and stockings and heels, dazed from her swift abduction and transport, Lena could only dully obey.

For the past fifty years, unaging, Lena has indeed learned and fucked a lot. Although not visibly different, her head sometimes feels as if it's swelled ten times in size. And her fruitful loins have disgorged dozens of alien babies, the result of her congress with a host of unimaginable creatures. Naked mole-rats, exoskeletal ghouls, giant blue rabbits – Lena dreams that someday one of her babies – all of them taken away by her original captors shortly after weening – will return to rescue her and return her to a planet she only vaguely recalls.

Idly, she wonders what Klaw is paying for a photo session these days.

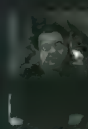
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THE

PAUL DI FILIPPO

FURTHEST SCHORR

32 FUGUES ON THE PAINTINGS OF TODD SCHORR



AUTHOR'S NOTE: Recently I had the pleasure of contributing critical commentary to a lush new art book, Todd Schorr's *Dreamland* (Last Gasp, 2004). Schorr's paintings all possess great narrative and allegorical drive, and I found myself spinning stories in my head around each canvas, little vignettes that intersected Schorr's artwork at odd angles. These are those stories, their titles taken from Schorr's canvases. I hope my pieces resonate, even without the inspirational artwork beside them, and that they motivate readers to search out Schorr's otherworldly art. My thanks also to Harlan Ellison and Michael Swanwick for their pioneering work in the field of literary miniaturization.

A GOOBER AND A TUBER IN AN EXCHANGE OF FISTICUFFS

Midge was doing plenty all right for herself. A gal with nothing much to get by on except for her va-va-voom figure and an enigmatic blank gaze that certain joes found sexy, she had come out of the worst kind of poverty and landed in the lap of luxury. Not exactly the brightest bulb in the chandelier, she nonetheless knew when she had a good thing going.

And this affair with Skippy Goober was one helluva sweet deal.

Oh, sure, he had his drawbacks and failings and quirks, like anything in trousers. The only position he liked for screwing was doggie-style. Claimed he had a hard time getting up off his back once he was down, and his skinny little legs always collapsed when he tried boring old missionary style. And his body odor – whew! Even Mum failed to hide that earthy scent. But worst of all was his temper. Once Skippy wrapped himself around a few drinks – mai-tais were his favorite – he could be as brutal and mean as Senator McCarthy looking for Reds. Still, he had never yet hit Midge – she had told him she'd knife him while he slept if he ever laid a hand on her – and he did take her out to the nicest places.

Like tonight, at the Brown Derby, with all the swells and stars admiring Midge's cleavage. Heaven on earth.

Until Argus Toober had shown up.

Toober was Goober's rival in the rackets. They hated each other like North Korea hated South Korea. And now that idiot maitre'd was seating Toober right next to Midge and her man!

Goober growled and hefted his sword-cane. Midge sighed and surreptitiously checked her purse for her mad money. Looked like she'd be going home alone. No playing with Goober's stalk and peanuts tonight.

VARIATIONS IN KITSCH

5 The anonymous respirator-wearing worker tending the giant bubbling vat of lava-lamp fluid leaned over just a bit too far. Out of his shirt pocket fell a small, curious pebble he had picked up on the way to work that morning. That pebble was, in fact, the remnant of a thousand-ton meteorite from beyond the Horsehead Nebula, all that had survived the burning passage through Earth's atmosphere, and it possessed uncanny properties.

The lamps filled with the contaminated fluid were shipped around the nation.

One went to Kaarlo Krisp, a Broadway set designer who lived in a Greenwich Village apartment surrounded by all the nostalgic icons of his youth acquired through assiduous collecting.

Kaarlo tripped while carrying the lava lamp upstairs and dropped it, opening a hairline crack in its vessel. Nervously running his finger around the glass, Kaarlo simultaneously cut himself and absorbed some of the alien fluid into his cut.

During the next ten hours Kaarlo experienced a trip like no other human had ever undergone. He journeyed to a world where cavemen manned a NASA-style Mission Control, and another where tubby porkers bowled an infinite succession of perfect games. The *ménage à trois* with Sheena Queen of the Jungle and the Fujiyama Mama brought a tear to his eye. He was just getting used to the constantly shifting scenery and characters when a small crocodile wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a sombrero materialized and said, "Hey, kid, is your ticket punched?"

"No," Kaarlo replied.

Despite its diminutive size, the crocodile conductor had no difficulty with getting the prongs of his punch into Kaarlo's ears, or with squeezing real hard.

ROBOT MAINTENANCE AT THE PARKERIAN MINING COMPANY

As soon as the snotty foreman approached Charlie, Charlie knew he was gonna hand Charlie the shitty end of one stick or another.

7 The first words out of the foreman's mouth confirmed this intuition.

"Scarpetto! You're detailed to the Lavender Shaft immediately. We just got an order for ten thousand kilos from the Empress of Saturn. And you know her perfumed majesty don't like to be kept waiting. Last time a shipment was just one stinking day late, she executed a dozen diplomats."

"But boss," Charlie complained, though he knew his squawk would make no difference, "the Lavender Shaft is ripe for a blowout!"

"Then you'd better make sure it don't happen till you harvest your quota. Check out a GSA robo and get busy."

The foreman left before Charlie could even whine about being assigned a GSA. Those lousy robos broke down if you even looked crosswise at 'em. Resignedly, Charlie moved to follow instructions.

Work on Sachet IX was hell. The bathbead mines offered only hot, perfume-redolent, dangerous labor. Why, just last month a blowout in the Honeysuckle Pits had slaughtered a score of workers.

Charlie and the GSA had been at work in the Lavender Shaft for six hours when Charlie heard the first ominous burblings that signalled a blowout. Hastening up the shaft ladder, Charlie knew he wasn't gonna make it.

But then he felt the claw hands of the GSA shoving him to safety, just as the beads erupted.

Damn that robo! Why'd he have to go and screw up Charlie's anti-cyber prejudices like that?

THE MARTIAN LABORATORY

Pooja was a big standard poodle. But not a show dog, by any means.

6 Abandoned by her owner, Pooja had been for many years a rough-and-tumble denizen of alleys and abandoned buildings, waste lots and under-the-bridge encampments. From time to time she had taken up with a human, a bum or bindlestiff. But always Pooja's willfulness and desire for independence had led to a parting of the ways.

Pooja was no one's bitch.

Today Pooja was nosing around a warehouse that boasted an odd veil of odors, smells of exotic chemicals and foreign meat. The latter scent promised to assuage the rumbling of her empty stomach, so Pooja persisted in seeking entrance to the warehouse. Eventually she found a loose sheet of plywood covering a busted basement window, and wormed her way inside.

The main floor was lit with an eerie golden light emanating from many complex machines. Three exotic beings with bulging naked brains and skeletal visages, dressed in high-collared robes, hovered around the unconscious form of a human woman.

"My brain hurts," said one of the Martians.

"Of course it does, you idiot," said a second alien. "Your collar's too tight!"

"Will you two shut up and help me position this quantum scalpel?" urged the third.

The alluring meat scent was coming from the Martians! They smelled better than a dozen pork-chop-stuffed chickens! When Pooja dived at the closest Martian, knocking the alien over into delicate equipment that smashed and caused a cascade of chaotic destruction, it was not because she cared one whit about the fate of the unconscious woman (who actually perished in the resulting conflagration). All she had in mind was chomping down on a mouthful of Martian flesh.

A week later she was still gnawing with immense satisfaction on that extra-sturdy Martian neckbone of the victim she had dragged away.

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THE SAILOR MAN

8 When the doctors put Vestry Asquith back together after his death, they exercised all their creativity.

It was Vestry's bad luck that the doctors had been aliens who knew nothing about human anatomy.

The Dripps had found Vestry's corpse floating in space in the holed-out remnants of his pirate ship, the *Betelgeuse Bandit*. Vestry had lost a run-in with the Galactic Posse after trying to attack a cargo liner and been left floating, quite dead, in interstellar space. But his extinction posed nothing except a

challenge to the Dripps.

Enormous nose-shaped beings on squirming snail-like footings, continually exuding sinus fluid from their various orifices, the Dripps were master biologists and cyberneticians. But they reasoned in a manner completely unlike human beings.

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Sharon Tudge looked past her twitched-aside window curtain and across her wide immaculate lawn at her neighbor's house.

The place was an absolute disgrace! The hulk of a junk Buick rested on four cinderblocks. A rusting playset squatted like the burned-out skeleton of a small crashed aircraft. The barrel of a washing machine, resting on its side, served as a doghouse for a yapping mongrel. Whatever grass had once grown around the house was now mostly dead from dogshit deposits. A week's worth of unread newspapers littered the walkway. A hand-scrawled sign hanging on the fence read SALESMEN BLOW IT OUT YOUR ASS!

But more shocking than all these degenerate appurtenances was the house's owner, Harly Daimon, who now sprawled nearly naked on a spavined lawn chair, soaking up the sunshine, a forty-ounce bottle of beer easily to hand, his big hairy gut an offense to nature.

Retreating from her window, Sharon felt her indignation mounting. She could stand this gross insult no longer.

She stalked across the street, stood outside Harly's decaying picket fence, and loudly harumphed.

Harly opened one boozy eye but did not arise. "What's your problem, twat?"

"Why, I never -!"

"Good. If you never pissed me off yet, don't start now."

Left speechless, Sharon could only retreat back to the pristine fortress of her home.

When her husband, Brad Tudge, returned that night from his office in the city, Sharon catalogued all of Harly Daimon's sins: womanizing, sloppiness, disrespect, casual modes of dress, and a dozen others. Brad nodded reflectively, then said, "I'll handle this, dear. But not on an empty stomach. Let's have dinner first."

And as Brad tucked his napkin into his collar, Sharon proudly set down the platter of roasted human fetuses before her perfect husband.

Thus they employed the DNA of the plants in Vestry's oxygen-generation unit to rebuild Vestry's nose. They fused a portion of the casing of one of his ship's photon-mines to his skull. They endowed him with radar ears and testicle chin. One eye was sutured shut while the other was replaced with the Panopticon

THE HAREM DANCER

Hamid al-Khouri, an Iraqi youth who from childhood had exhibited uncanny native skills with paint and ink, chalk and clay, had eventually attended Rhode Island School of Design for two years on an international scholarship before he got radicalized.

Thus was born the art car bomb.

Upon his terrorist epiphany, al-Khouri had returned to the Middle East to wage jihad. With style.

Disdaining conventional anonymity as the coward's way, betokening a lack of pride in the terrorist's calling, Hamid insisted that every explosive-packed vehicle whose production he oversaw left the bomb factory uniquely detailed. Further contravening the Islamic injunction against figurative representation (his semesters at RISD had left a certain Western impression after all), Hamid opted for eye-popping, kandy-flake, day-glo montages for his death vehicles.

The sixty virgins of paradise awarded each martyr undulated sensuously across bumpers and roofs. Devil worms that would torment the infidels in hell spat venom from hoods and trunks. Troops of turban-wearing monkeys representing traitorous imams cavorted across door panels.

Of course, the authorities at first welcomed such extravagant displays of terrorist art. They felt that their job had been made infinitely simpler: just watch for the al-Khouri specials, and you could preempt any bombing.

But then Hamid's art spawned a thousand imitators. Pretty soon, every other car in the Middle East was a rolling, gaudy canvas. The ones packed with TNT were indistinguishable from regular traffic. Everyone braced for an increase in unstoppable bombings.

But then, against all logic, terrorist events began to *decrease*.

Hamid's students had begun to care too much for their art to destroy it.

Frustrated, Hamid created his masterpiece and took it himself on a one-way mission. When he awoke in heaven, Ed Roth hugged him first, then cold-cocked him.

THE VENUS OF AUGMENTATION

Every savvy businessman had to cut corners somewhere. That was just the way the postmodern economy worked.

So Dr Manson Sozaboy began dumping his medical waste illegally. What harm could it cause, after all? And those greedy sanctioned haulers charged an arm and a leg (if you'll pardon the pun).

Manson specialized in one simple procedure: breast reduction. The only waste he generated was a little innocent gland-threaded fat.

It seemed a shame, really. All these well-endowed babes coming into his office to get de-boobed while elsewhere their less zaftig sisters were opting for the exact opposite procedure. Too bad, the doctor often thought, that some kind of simple swap couldn't be arranged.

One night Manson chucked his latest batch of waste into a local swamp. A swamp favored by all the other cost-cutters in town, such as several advanced bioengineering firms.

In the darkness, rogue organic and exotic inorganic components churned and recombined. By dawn, Breast Thing was born.

A thousand lush hues of pink and caramel, Breast Thing resembled one of those ancient fertility goddess statues: a faceless humanoid form draped with a hundred tits of all shapes and sizes, some with lactating nipples. Clambering out of the swamp, Breast Thing shambled instinctively toward the home of her father.

The police found Dr Manson Sozaboy drowned in his bed, a look blending terror and ecstasy on his face. The forensics guy just shook his head and said, "I'll be damned if I can figure out where the hell any sick bastard gets enough colostrum to drown someone."

Breast Thing runs a titty bar in New Orleans now. But all she does is hang in the back office and count the take.

scanner off the *Bandit*. The keys of his mood-Moog substituted for his teeth. His brain was hybridized with circuitry.

Vestry awoke at last, saw himself in a mirror, and screamed.

The Dripps stuck a Panacea Pipe in his mouth and he calmed down a tad. Finally

he was able to reconcile himself to his new appearance. Hadn't he been given, after all, a second chance at life?

But then all his tentative calm was shattered when one of the Dripps said the most frightening words possible.

"Now we will build you a mate."

AMONG THE LIVING BY KAREN D. FISHLER

Dake woke out of a red-soaked dream with a sudden clear sense of being present, as if he had opened his eyes to a brilliantly sunny morning. For a moment both were with him, the war in the past and the light of now. Then the pain in his legs and hips returned and he saw the white walls of the hospital.

"They told me you're doing better today," Marguerite said.

Dake smiled. Important to be cheerful.

"How could I not be better?" he said. "You're both here."

And indeed, Chesty was already wriggling out of her arms, half-falling onto the bed, his tail wagging madly, jostling the IV in his effort to get to Dake's face. He licked Dake's nose first, then his whole face, then sneezed and licked Dake again.

"Oh, Chesty," Marguerite said. "You're almost as old as we are, how can you have so much energy?"

Dake laughed, but that hurt, so he stopped and stroked Chesty with one hand instead. Marguerite held the other.

She eased down onto the edge of the bed, gently so as not to cause any more disturbance. She looked tired. Chesty had sat down so that he partly blocked Dake's view of Marguerite. He panted and wagged his tail.

"No, but really," she said. "We had a conference yesterday, while you were still in recovery, and they said if you take all the medications, do all the exercising –"

"Prolonging the agony," Dake said. He couldn't help it.

Marguerite looked away.

"Sweetheart," he said. "We've been through this twice before. They patch me together again and send me home. It's not as if I haven't taken care of myself. Nobody could have tried harder. It's just a losing battle by now."

"I need you," Marguerite whispered. "So does Chesty. We could still have time together."

Photograph of Karen Fishler © Rosanne Oison



She suddenly looked impossibly young, innocent, her face soft. Her eyes were a translucent blue, like the light of morning.

How did people say goodbye? Dake thought. How did they do it? He sighed.

"I'll try," he said. "I'll do my best."

"We'll do it together," Marguerite said. She leaned over and put her head next to Chesty's. They peered at him, their cheeks touching, human and dog, the two he loved the best and had loved so long. He smiled back as well as he could.

"I'm going to go get a cup of coffee," Marguerite said. "Why don't I leave Chesty with you for a bit? You can both take a nap, then I'll be back."

She kissed Dake, gave Chesty a hug, and went away. Chesty turned around several times, then fell against Dake and let out a big slobbery sigh as he fell asleep.

Dake drifted off, but even in his sleep he could feel the pain in the lower part of his body, where they had rebuilt everything – for the third time – to keep the newest surge of degeneration from creeping upward. At least it wasn't as bad as the pain that had brought him here. Strange that life consisted now of hoping the pain would be the most bearable it could be. It reminded him of combat, the knowledge that underneath the smooth skin there was so much red, so much that was sensitive and could feel pain. Thinking this, he fell back into the dream, but suddenly it was not the red of blood around him, but black. He stood in a boat. The water was black and still, utterly cold. The sky was black. A long dark robe covered him. He held a long pole in his hand. He pushed it down and the boat moved forward, toward the hulk of black that showed as land ahead, black against the black sky, above the black water. Nothing around him, nothing, just the black extent of the universe, filling him with terror.

A noise occurred, a sound from far away, like a message delivered from so distant a place that the meaning could not reach him. The message was vitally important, urgent, he must hear it, but –

He gasped and woke. Chesty was barking, standing on all fours on the bed as if to guard against a predator.

A man stood and watched Dake.

"Who are you?" Dake said. He put a hand on Chesty's head. Chesty stopped barking and sat down. His tail stayed still on the blanket.

The man brought a visitor's chair from where it stood next to the sink and folded himself down onto it, crossing his legs.

"Excuse me for just walking in," he said. "My name is Eiler, Adelphi Eiler. I'm from US-Noropean military support. We service all branches."

He leaned forward and shook Dake's hand. Chesty sniffed silently at Eiler's hand and arm. Clearly he didn't like this visitor. Dake wasn't sure he liked him, either.

"Why are you in my hospital room?" Dake said. "I'm not exactly fit for duty. Plus I already did my service – a long time ago."

"I'm well aware, Mr Hopp," Eiler said. "I've studied your record in some detail. You had a knack for getting things done. You seemed to enjoy yourself, too."

Memories presented themselves in a silent flash before Dake's eyes. He felt himself pulled toward them, attracted. He shoved them away, but the memories resisted, as if he were holding something



under water that wanted to breathe.

"Well," he said. "That was another life. That's not me anymore. Hasn't been for a long time. I'm married now. Old. Sick. I don't see the relevance."

"Actually, your condition, combined with your experience, is highly relevant. We could use you, Mr Hopp. You and a lot of other veterans. We can put you back in action. It would do you a world of good, and the war effort would benefit greatly from mixing seasoned soldiers in with the newer troops."

He paused. Dake stared at him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded.

Eiler leaned forward and lowered his voice. "You'll be twenty years old," he said. "Fresh as a daisy and raring to go. We need you, Dake. You need us."

"What?" said Dake. "My wife –"

"You're leaving your wife, Dake," Eiler said. "You're leaving her by dying. It's inevitable. You know it as well as I do."

Chesty began to growl, a low, almost inaudible sound. Dake put a hand on his head to hush him.

"This is bullshit," Dake said. "Who the fuck are you? Get out of my room."

Eiler sat back. "I understand," he said.

"I don't think so," said Dake.

"I respect your feelings," said Eiler. "The end of life...how do you tell somebody what to do in that situation? All I can say is

that for ten years of service, you'll get a whole new lifetime. In addition to your service pay, there's a bonus for anyone who enters the program – you can sign it over to Marguerite and she'll have that extra safety net. It'll help her. It'll help you honor her. Eventually you'll remarry. Maybe have kids this time. Another dog." He smiled at Chesty, who didn't seem inclined to return the sentiment.

"Get out," said Dake.

Eiler stood up. "Call the day officer at McKinley if you change your mind," he said. "Tell them your name. They'll find me."

"Get the fuck out," said Dake.

Eiler went. Chesty turned around and licked Dake's face again as if in relief that Dake was still there, then snuffled down with his snout against Dake's side. And every time Dake glanced down at Chesty, the dog's gaze was on him. Dake lay awake for a long time, waiting for Marguerite to come back, wanting more than anything to see her face, to know that she was still with him, even as the panic stayed just below the surface, the panic that told him Eiler held the only chance of him not having to go back in that boat.

"You can't," said Marguerite, aghast. "How can they do that? The risk –" She put her hand on her mouth to stop herself. "It's a possibility," Dake said, "versus a certainty."

They sat on the back deck in the shade of the trellis, Dake in his wheelchair and Marguerite at the little round glass table, and listened to the ocean for a few minutes. Morning sun leaped over the roof from the far side of the house and pinked the waves.

"They say it would help the war effort," Dake said.

"The hell with the war effort," said Marguerite. He looked at her in astonishment. She had never sworn in forty-seven years. "It's you I'm concerned with, not them," she added.

"I know you enjoyed being a soldier, killing people," she went on. "You never talk about it, but I know you did all that once, before we met. I wonder that you can picture doing it again."

"I was good at it," said Dake.

"How nice," she said angrily.

"I could do it again."

"Then do so, by all means," Marguerite said.

Chesty got up from his sleep in a spot of sun and came to lean against her.

"Sweetheart..."

"Don't say that!" she burst out. "Not when I'm going to lose you one way or the other!"

She put a hand on Chesty's head. The other, trembling, pressed her face and hid her eyes. Dake could see the tears anyway.

He himself was dry-eyed. The previous two rebuilds had left him sentimental, prone to weeping and outbursts of feeling. This time a cold knowledge held him still.

Marguerite recovered herself. She took her hand from her face, wiped the tears away. "I suppose," she said, "you want me to take you to them. Be

your chauffeur to the new world."

He tried to smile at her. "I don't want to take a taxi," he said. "I want every minute to be with you."

"Every minute before you end it," she said.

"Before I begin again."

Even to him it sounded hollow, set against the reality of that beautiful dawn, with her looking at him, just looking at him, and the sound of Chesty's panting breaths as they mixed with the rhythm of the waves. A sweetness swept over him. Maybe the end could be like this. Would it be so terrible to just close his eyes and go to sleep?

Then he remembered the dream, the things he had seen as a young man. Death was icy, black, empty.

"I'm needed," he said. "My experience. Veterans are steadier, calmer. We can prevent casualties. I'd never forgive myself if I didn't go and I could have kept somebody from dying."

"How dare you preach to me about preventing casualties!" Marguerite said. "This is about preventing *yourself* from being a casualty – of ordinary life. Of age and death. It's acceptable for me to slide downhill and eventually go under, isn't it? But heaven forbid you should experience anything besides glory. Go ahead, make yourself a god, that's what you want."

She sat with perfect posture in her well-behaved way, shaking. Dake moved the wheelchair forward, still awkward at the controls, to prevent her from getting up. Chesty made way for him. He took Marguerite by the forearms, which was as far as he could reach without pain.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Everything you say is true. I don't really know why I'm doing it, except that I'm afraid. If I were going to live, I'd stay with you. But I'm going to die. Let me live, Marguerite. Please. Let me live."

Gradually her tremble faded. She held his gaze. The tears slowed, then stopped. And he knew in that moment that he'd lost her.

he conversion facility was itself converted, obviously a former warehouse. Other candidates Dake's own age stood killing time in a cluster in front of the enormous sliding door.

"Dake Hopp," he told the guard, bringing the wheelchair to a stop in front of the group.

"Morning, sir," said the guard. "Coming to re-up, sir?"

"Why else would I be here, son?" Dake said.

"Yes, sir," the guard said. He took Dake's eyescan and consulted a list. "It'll be a few minutes, sir."

Dake nodded and counted the others. Seventeen of them: eleven men, six women. Most of them were already talking to each other, arms folded. His discussions with Eiler during his convalescence had made it clear how experimental the program was, and Dake wondered if any of them would actually survive the transition. *Maybe Marguerite was right*, he thought. *Maybe I should just go home*. Then he thought of the boat in the dream. And reminded himself of the things Eiler had talked about, the things nobody wanted to see or hear about: the Gauntlet, the Iron Tree Palace, Ambush City. Experience had to help in those places. That was the whole idea of the program.

You coward, he thought.

At fifteen-minute intervals the other candidates were let inside one by one. Only Dake and a man who had shown up after him were left.

"Are you ready, sir?"

Dake looked back at the parking lot, the scrub trees beyond, the mountains in the distance, the haze in the sunny air. The last time looking at these things, as himself. The self he knew. The ordinary things. "Ready," he said.

The guard spoke into his wrist, then slid the door open and let him wheel himself inside. Another soldier stood waiting for him. She led him along the inside of the warehouse. In the interior of the vast space was a mass of equipment around ranks of clear basins filled with something – liquid? Gaseous? It was a pale blue and translucent, like morning light. The color of Marguerite's eyes. As they walked by, glimpses flickered and glowed between looping cables and dark pedestals that no doubt supported control banks. He guessed the medium was a viscous liquid. He found the color poetic, a metaphor for the rebirth of the conversion.

The soldier saw that he had slowed the wheelchair to look.

"That's where you'll be submerged during the conversion process, sir," she said. "They grow them someplace else, then ship them here."

Dake imagined a factory. Lines of vats. He eyed the soldier. She was sturdy, brown-haired, wired with energy.

"What's it like being young, soldier?" he asked.

"Don't you remember, sir?"

"It was quite a while ago."

She smiled. "You'll love it, sir," she said.

She led him to a little room made of partitions above which the enormous space was fully evident. There must have been a hell of a soundproofing system, for Dake heard nothing of the

"Dake drifted off, but even in his sleep he could feel the pain in the lower part of his body, where they had rebuilt everything – for the third time – to keep the newest surge of degeneration from creeping upward"

conversation inside. As he and his escort approached, the door to the partitioned room opened and a man just older than Dake shuffled slowly out. He avoided Dake's eyes.

Dake rolled himself in and closed the door behind him. Eiler looked up from his readout screen. Dake realized for the first time that he was in his late fifties. Not so far away from the kind of choices that faced Dake. Dake brought the wheelchair to a stop before the desk, trying to make sure his fear and unease didn't show.

"Glad you're here, Dake," Eiler said. They both half-rose and shook hands.

"Big place you've got here."

"Yeah, it's a bitch to keep warm in the winter," Eiler said, and they both chuckled.

"So," Eiler said. "You're ready?"

"There's no way to be ready for something like this. You must know that."

"You're aware this is an experimental procedure?"

"I've signed the releases."

"They've explained the training program, your likely deployment—"

"Yes, damn it. The only thing I want to know is that my wife will get the bonus."

Eiler folded his hands on the desk and gave Dake a good look.

"Of course she'll get it. And she'll appreciate it. Eventually. Trust me."

Dake was silent.

"Look, Dake, I know it's not my place –"

"You're right, it's not."

"– but try to understand that she'll make her peace with what you're doing. You have to give her that dignity."

Dake thought of Marguerite and shivered. "Let's get on with it," he said.

Eiler shrugged and waved one hand through a display hovering in the air just above the surface of the desk. A young woman with a midnight blue, no-insignia uniform, her face like that of an eighteenth-century European aristocrat, opened the door and leaned in.

"Mr Hopp?" she said. "Come with me, if you're ready."

Dake was appalled with himself for instantly finding the woman attractive (*She won't be too young for me anymore, will she?*). When he wheeled himself out of the office after her, the final candidate looked at him, as if to divine clues about the conversation he faced. But Dake ignored him. He had found the encounter disturbing, and not just because of the young woman. Eiler had waved goodbye without even glancing up. He had dismissed Dake entirely.

Light training ended and Dake stowed his gear, methodical as he had always been. He went to the lounge, where trainees lined up at the bar before bedtime to gab and posture, like birds on a wire.

Dake got a beer and sipped it. Once in awhile he accidentally caught his reflection in the bar mirror – a bulked-up, twenty-year-old stranger with red hair and freckles – but he avoided looking at it. His mind was on Marguerite. He heard a voice and

abruptly returned to the present. At his left, another trainee said, "You're a convert, aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?" Dake said. "Farrer, right?"

Farrer's eyes were brown, his shaven scalp showing the remnants of black hair. "You're not so impulsive as the rest of us," he said.

"You think about what you're doing." He gave Dake a sly smile.

"Plus you seem a little slower on your feet."

"Nothing practice won't solve, son," Dake said.

"I'm not your son, asshole," the boy said loudly. He shoved Dake in the chest, pushing him hard against another recruit. A domino effect behind Dake made him stagger and fall backward into someone else's arms, then the line pushed him toward Farrer again.

"No need for a problem," Dake said. He could feel the adrenaline, the urge to smash the boy's face in. He pictured Eiler watching him. Marguerite.

"You're the problem," Farrer said. "Converts think they know better 'cause they used to be old. But you're just like us now."

He pulled back to punch Dake, but Dake beat him to it. The boy reeled from the blow, his face flooding with red. He took a deep breath and flew at Dake. Dake ducked, lifting him up in the same motion. He half-twirled, then dumped Farrer on the floor. Farrer's head hit the hard surface with a crump, and he made a high grunt of surprise, then groped as he tried to find his breath.

A space had cleared around them. Dake looked down at Farrer. "I'm just like you now, only new and improved," he said. "Keep that in mind."

A moment of silence, then Farrer let out a chuckle, and finally started laughing. Knowing the situation was resolved, Dake smiled slightly.

He returned to his beer, hoping the energy would drain out of him quickly. The cold liquid went down his throat. Behind him, someone helped Farrer up and shuffling sounds told Dake he had been led away. The crowd lost interest. The sound level rose again.

"Is this how it's been for you?"

Just what I need, someone to tell my troubles to, Dake thought.

But she was fabulous, her eyes dark and glowing, her hair a close-clipped black fringe.

"Pretty much," he said. "I try to preserve my anonymity, but they keep taking it away from me."

She laughed.

"I don't think we can stay hidden," she said. "The program doesn't necessarily intend us to."

"You –"

"I know, I seem so young." She laughed again, the laugh of a college student. It made Dake think of Marguerite when they had just met. But Marguerite was in California, drying up like the desert, while he was here in the wilds of Wisconsin, looking down at a woman his own age who was obviously as ready to go as he was.

"How about we take a walk?" he said.

"Depends where," she said.

Where turned out to be behind a tree next to the lake, where the fir branches swooped down to enclose them like a bower. They went fast at first, then slowed down. Dake had never had sex with a woman so direct, so tall, so physically strong. Not having to hold back made the experience seem larger and more intense, and so did the fact that they were in the woods and it was dark.

He asked her name: Tomlinson, Morgan. Her skin was perfectly smooth, pale, rippling where it passed over her muscles. He felt the breeze on the backs of his knuckles as he stroked her shoulder and her throat afterward.

"Where are you from?" she said.

"No place now, I guess," he said. "Originally California. You?"

"North Carolina. The western part, where the mountains are. I used to hike the Blue Ridge all the time when I was a kid. Used to pick off squirrels with a laser gun."

"Sounds like a tall tale," he said.

"No, truly," she protested, and they both laughed.

"We lived next to the ocean," he said.

"Sounds like you left somebody behind," she said.

"My wife," he said.

"Harsh."

"She thought so. She wouldn't accept my body for burial. They cremated me."

"Me, too. But I didn't even ask my family to bury me, I knew they wouldn't do it. I left four brothers. My father died last year. He was young, only seventy.

One of the supercancers. I wasn't so lucky. I got it a lot earlier." She sighed. "My sisters-in-law will

take care of the boys."

"While you see the world," said Dake.

They lay there listening to night sounds, the heat gradually leaving them. From the far side of the lake the officers' building, where the lounge was located, sent out an uneven mutter of voices and occasional bursts of laughter. Around them the woods shifted. Dake heard an animal move through the brush, and the water, hidden by the trees, sipped at the shore. The trees' decay and their growth were wet in his nostrils.

He sat up and shrugged on his shirt, while Morgan propped herself on one elbow.

"Is it like you thought it would be?" Morgan said.

"No," said Dake. "It's better."

She laughed, as she had in the lounge. "Based on the foregoing," she said, "I have to agree."

"But I have this feeling sometimes..." Dake said. He stopped.

"Yeah," she said. "The I-shouldn't-be-here feeling."

"For me it's not that specific," Dake said. "I just wonder sometimes where I am. I think I'm home, or I imagine I'm in the backyard, or out in the desert with our dog."

"Did you go back?"

"After the conversion? No. Marguerite, my – she would have thrown me out. Did you?"

"I came close," Morgan said. "During the last phase, when they told us to go try out what we are now. I took a few days to go back, and got as far as the drugstore in town. Then my youngest brother came in. He was older than me by that point, of course – way older. He saw me, realized I was looking at him. You might think he'd assume I was a younger woman interested in an older guy, right? But he knows he's not that attractive. Plus, we were always the closest. He could just tell it was me. He hadn't wanted me to do it, you know, they never do. Why would they? We're leaving them, and they know it. Me and Brody, we kind of stood there looking at each other. Aisles of stuff between us. Face cream, analgesics, vitamins, all that. After awhile he turned around and went and paid for his things and left without speaking to me. And I went right out and got on the trim-tram for Wisconsin."

The darkness and the wavering shadows covered everything except the moonlit orb of her face. Dake looked behind him at a whisper of sound, then turned his head to follow an enormous owl as it ghosted by them, white between the black of the trees. Rare to see such a bird nowadays.

"No regrets, after that?" he asked.

"No regrets," she said. "You?"

"None," he said, suppressing the thought of Marguerite. "None at all. It was the right thing to do. Once you start thinking otherwise, you're dead."

"Yo, Boom-Boom," said Dake into his hud. He shifted to get more comfortable, something that wasn't so easy of late. Was the wear and tear of five years enough to account for it? He didn't think so. His twenty-five-year-old muscles notwithstanding, his knees hurt again. And there was a tiny spot of pain in the back of his head. He ignored it as he'd done for months, even while he knew all the time that it was getting worse. "You guys there yet?"

"Just about, boss," said Boom-Boom's voice. "Drift of the current's right. Those fucks won't know what hit 'em."

"They will if you don't shut up," said Dake.

No answer. Dake could hear the rush of the water through

Boom-Boom's outgoing. He sat there alone for a moment in the lookout. The expanse of the blue-green valley was pristine except for a faint smear of khaki near the Künes He where the Chinese column, on the move, almost blended into the roadway. It was morning, and the blue of the sky reminded Dake of the conversion fluid in the tanks back at the warehouse near the base in California.

Please god, let the coolfab have really hid us from those bastards, he thought. *Please god, protect Boom-Boom and the guys with him.* Without putting it into mind-words, he prayed fleetingly to Marguerite as well. For forgiveness and protection.

"Hopp," said a ragged, breathless voice. Dake didn't have time to react before Evanham heaved himself up into the lookout next to Dake.

The smell of rations emanated from Evanham's mouth, making the lookout, a curl of rock tucked into the piled-up masses of western China's Borohoro Shan, seem befouled. Dake suddenly wished he was with Boom-Boom, floating down the river toward the ford.

"What the hell are you doing?" said Evanham. "You were ordered to secure the crossing. I don't see any fucking securing going on. You should have briefed me."

Dake shut down his outgoing so Boom-Boom wouldn't hear any more of the dispute. Asshole though Evanham was, if Dake were in his place, he wouldn't want enlisted men to know he was bickering with a line officer. Evanham was such a moron that he didn't even realize that was an issue.

"I couldn't find you, sir. You were at RHQ and I couldn't raise

« Night training ended and Dake stowed his gear, methodical as he had always been. He went to the lounge, where trainees lined up at the bar before bedtime to gab and posture, like birds on a wire »

you or anybody who would go find you. But I left three briefing messages for you on your own commlist, and another with the control officer," he said. "Boom-Boom – Nordhoff – is in the river, sir, along with four others from my unit. He's due to sweep over the crossing a few minutes before the Chinese do. They'll sprinkle the riverbed with spikers as they float over the ford, then get themselves to the near bank and watch for the Chinese to get to the middle of the river. Then they'll blow the spikers and we can lift ourselves down to make the bridge. Kill enemies. Capture crossing. On to the provincial capital. What's the problem, sir?"

"The problem," said Evanham, "is that you apparently requisitioned spikers from the engineers without telling me, instead of doing this the usual way. Work with me, Hopp. How many times do I have to tell you that? You think being a fucking convert means you can go around your fucking commanding officer? This could have been done yesterday and we could have settled in and waited for the fucking Chooks to come and try to take our fucking bridge from us. But no." He was sweating with the exertion of chewing Dake out. "You have to make the grand fucking gesture."

Dake paused. "We'll still be in the position of defending the river, sir," he said. "And we won't have that column to worry about when we do. Unless you'd like to let them go. Would you like me to pull Boom-Boom and the others out of the water?"

"No, I fucking would not, you arrogant fuck," said Evanham. "What I would like is for you to adjust your fucking thinking so you're with the fucking program."

He jumped heavily down, out of the lookout, and began lumbering back down the trail to temp, where other non-converts waited to tell Evanham he was right, that converts like Dake were too big-headed and needed to be controlled.

Evanham turned back. "When you get through lengthening your dick here and grace us with your fucking presence, report to Francisco," he said. "He wants to look you over. Thinks you might have lost a step or two. He should know, yeah?"

He smiled and left.

Dake closed his eyes for a moment. Maybe he should see if they'd allow him to hand in his field status, let the Evanhams of the world take over, and say so much for the great experiment, which had failed to take human resentment into account.

But they wouldn't let him do that, would they? He was of no real use to them if he wasn't here or someplace like it. And besides, how long would he last physically, even if he could get himself taken out of combat and put in some sort of data function? Francisco could tell him that. He was a convert himself. He'd be honest. The trouble was, Dake wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer. The little pain throbbed in the back of his skull.

"Everything okay, boss? I only caught the beginning. You want me to shove a spiker up his ass for you once we're done here?"

Dake turned his outgoing back on. "Shut up, Boom-Boom," he said, smiling.

Silence except for the water sounds. Dake zoomed his view down onto the surface of the river above the ford, but there was no sign of Boom-Boom and the others. They must have submerged.

He waited, still praying to the god of coolfab manufacture, his peripherals tuned to pick up any movement in addition to the Chinese column moving away from him.

The khaki mass paused with its leading edge at the near bank. The column's scouts fanned out along the water's edge to the left and right of the troops. Dake zoomed way in and saw the sweepers at the head of the column with their equipment out, sensing for mines ahead. He added a prayer to the god of spiker development, hoping the word was good on how advanced the spikers were compared to the Chinese sweepers' current abilities. If it wasn't good, Evanham would fry Dake, Boom-Boom, and the rest of the team.

Finally the Chinese column leaders, evidently satisfied, led the column out into the water. The scouts fired up their packs and jetted out over the surface toward the far bank. Even from the lookout Dake could see them turn their heads from side to side as they crossed the water, still on the alert for threats. The Chinese conversion program was said to include enhancements Noropean technology hadn't perfected yet. The scouts probably had better eyesight than Norop converts like Dake had. Dake wondered if their knees hurt.

He redirected his outgoing. "Temp," he said. "Where's my putdown squad? Time's speeding up here."

"On the way, sir," a voice said.

"Well, tell them to get a move on, or you're calling their mothers."

Heavy gasps came through his hud now. Boom-Boom and his

team must have emerged from the water. Dake imagined them hidden from his view under the near bank, clinging to rocks and blades of grass to keep themselves stationary, using hand signals with each other when they could spare a grip. He tried to keep his stomach from clenching.

The Chinese column filled the water, khaki from bank to bank.

One of the scouts, in midair, suddenly pointed to the near bank and opened fire, his weapon spitting green. The rest of the scouts veered toward him. The mass of the column froze, then began a rush through the water toward the far bank.

"Now, now, Boom-Boom, blow them now!" Dake yelled into his hud.

Before he'd even finished speaking the spikers erupted in unison, a mass of angry fists that redly thrashed the water. Human cries carried through the air to the lookout, as if they were birdcalls.

Dake was finding it hard to breathe.

Pulses of light arced from Boom-Boom's team, invisible under the tuck of the near bank, toward the scouts, who fled, still airborne, toward the far side of the river. Dake zoomed in and saw Boom-Boom struggle up onto the near bank and bring down four of them. But one of the scouts paused in the air, turned, and let out a spatter of green-colored fire toward the team. One of Boom-Boom's men fired back. The scout twisted above the middle of the river, then his pack exploded. As he dropped to the water, he continued to fire, the green plasmatic flame staccatoing out in all directions. Some of the blips caught Boom-Boom. The flames, when they engulfed him, turned from green to orange. Boom-Boom danced like a goblin for a few seconds and then fell onto the grass.

Half a dozen scouts escaped, about what Dake had expected.

But Boom-Boom was dead.

Trying to breathe deeply, his head hurting, Dake zoomed farther in, found the team. "Escadio," he said. "Laffler. Speak up. How many of you left?"

"Four, sir," said Escadio, gasping. "Boom-Boom, he –"

"I know, son. Keep it together. Mind the stragglers on your side. We'll be down to get you in a few minutes."

Dake called the results back down to temp. Then suddenly he felt weak and had to lay his head down for a few seconds. The pain in his head had expanded to encompass his temple and forehead. Behind him he heard the dim collective sound of the transports getting ready to haul down the engineers and the guards and the rest of the assault group. Forcing himself to lift his head again, he zoomed in close to where the Chinese had crossed. A bloody foam slurred the river's surface and moved downstream. Body parts bobbed like bruised fruit. On both the near and far banks, a

few of the Chinese staggered out of the water and moved toward cover. Escadio and the rest of the

team found a clump of boulders and they and the Chinese began shooting arm rockets at each other. One of Boom-Boom's men flew out of the boulders as if he had bounced from a trampoline, then flopped as he hit the ground.

The putdown squad showed up with a clatter next to Dake.

"You okay, sir?" the lieutenant said. "You don't look so good."

He looked and sounded as if he were in high school in Mississippi.

"Shut up," said Dake. He pointed them to the targets on the ground. They went to work while Dake called for an airborne squad to go after the scouts.

The remaining Chinese grounders didn't last long. As soon as the putdowners were done, the transports lifted up from behind Dake, where everyone else, including Evanham, had waited, and swooped toward the river like vultures.

Dake stood up. He felt dizzy, tired, as if he needed to sleep for a hundred years and come back to a different era. His knees still hurt. And so did his head.

Chalk another one up for the vets, he thought. He turned his hud off for the walk back to temp and stepped down out of the lookout. Suddenly weakness flooded through him like a river.

"What was that, sir?" said one of the putdowners as he folded his gear away.

Dake hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud. He seemed to leave his body and watch it collapse. He watched the putdowners rush to turn him over so he was face up, watched them call for help.

"Nothing, son," he tried to say. "Nothing at all." But he wasn't sure if the words actually left his mouth.

"There's good news and bad news," Francisco said. "Which do you want first?"

Dake slowly put his clothes back on and then sat on a folding stool across from the examining table. Francisco fitted the probes neatly back into their dark-blue case.

"What I want first is a drink," Dake said. His head still hurt. So, now, did everything else.

Francisco smiled. He got out a flask and handed it to Dake.

"The good news is that your condition is curable," Francisco said. "The bad news is that when you're cured, you won't look like yourself anymore."

"I already don't look like myself, you know that," said Dake. He drank. The flask seemed heavy.

"There's another conversion in your future," said Francisco. "Your very near future."

Dake put the flask down, sapped by the effort of holding it. "Are you telling me I'm wearing out like a car?" he said, although by now the pain in his head and knees, and the overwhelming weakness, told him more than Francisco could. "After all that? I'm twenty-five years old, for Christ's sake."

"I used to be twenty-five," said Francisco. "Actually, twenty-six. Now I'm twenty again."

"You're kidding."

"Just like you, first-generation convert. I went to see my mother after they did me the first time – my hair was blond. Big mistake. She was a proud Castilian, or at least her ancestors were. She screamed at me. Said she didn't give birth to me so I could turn myself into a fucking Viking. She actually swore like that. You should have met my mother, she could rip your head off. She's dead now."

"So they couldn't do any better than five years?" said Dake. The whiskey was helping, as long as he didn't breathe too hard. "They

promise us a whole new life and it turns out to be five years? They wanted ten years of service. At this rate, I'll have to provide the last five using a cane. Maybe I'll be in a wheelchair by the time the contract is done."

His voice had risen.

"Have another drink," said Francisco.

"I don't want another drink!" Dake snapped. "I want what they promised me, goddamn it. I'm used to this by now, this – " He thumped his chest – "this carcass. I'm not going to start all over again, why the hell should I have to do that?"

Marguerite, he thought despairingly. *Marguerite. I'm going to be even farther away from you now.*

Evanham poked his head in the tent. "Everything okay with our wonder boys?" he asked.

Dake somehow got to his feet and raised the flask to throw it at Evanham, but Francisco grabbed his arm.

Evanham smiled. "Try not to go downhill any more while you're still with us, Hopp," he said. "Not that I won't enjoy watching you deteriorate. Maybe you'll be too far gone by the time they ship you out, and nobody will have to put up with you anymore."

He flipped the tent flaps closed and disappeared.

Francisco took the flask from Dake and swigged from it, then handed it back.

"He's right, you know," he said. "I'll have to keep you back from operations until I can get you out of here. There's a facility in Russia. They're already holding a place for you – "

"– a body. Say it."

« Dake was finding it hard to breathe. Pulses of light arced from Boom-Boom's team, invisible under the tuck of the near bank, toward the scouts, who fled, still airborne, toward the far side of the river »

"– that's right, a body. A body you should have as soon as you can get it." He grabbed Dake's shoulders. His grip hurt. "This one's breaking down. Rapidly. You need help. I'm going to make sure they give it to you."

He let Dake go and Dake sank back down onto the stool. The pain in his head had widened, like a fist opening to drop him down a well.

"All the trouble they went to," he said. "What was it for?"

Francisco sighed. "It was for exactly what they intended," he said. "It was to beef up military operations with experienced personnel. It was a new program. Every new program has problems. What did you expect?" He turned away and stowed the case in an open pack on the tent's grassy floor.

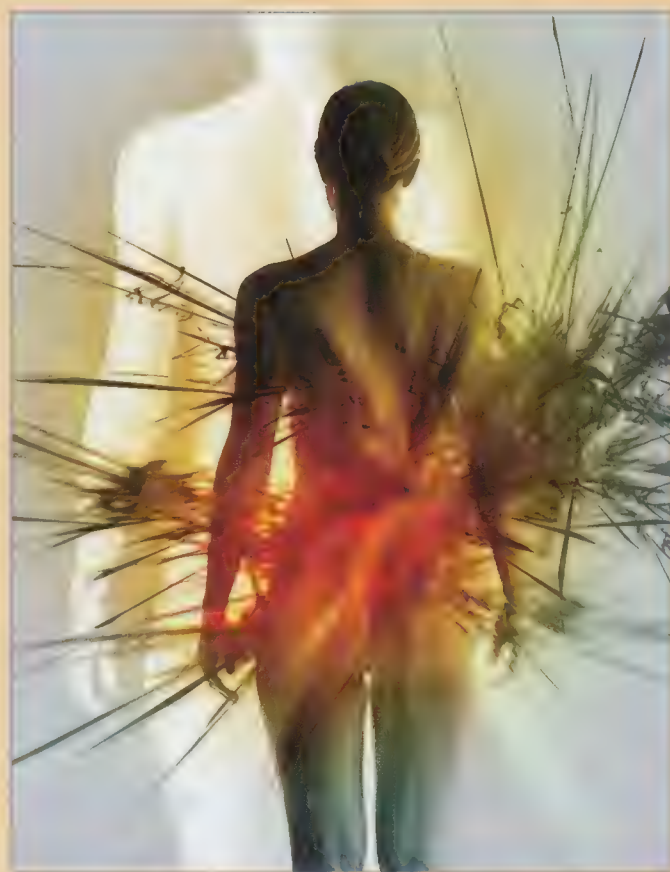
"I didn't expect to deteriorate faster than when I was in my sixties," Dake said. "I didn't expect every fucking relationship I have to be temporary."

Francisco hiked himself onto the examining table facing Dake. He looked at his hands. "Me, neither," he said. He brooded for a moment, then added, "It was rough for me, too. I lasted a little longer than you, but when I fell apart, it was faster. I could barely breathe by the time they converted me again."

Dake tried to read his expression. "Are you glad you did it, the second time?" he asked.

"Hell, yes," said Francisco. "What good would I be to other people if I was dead? For me, it's about helping."

For a moment there was silence, and Dake heard the varied



noises of the camp outside.

Francisco glanced at him then, and Dake saw shame in his expression.

"Also," Francisco said, "I was a fucking human being, so I was still afraid of dying. Freaking out, actually. And I'm a doctor, so I should know better. Death's a bullet headed straight for us. But we're idiots, so we dodge and weave."

He shook his head.

"Believe me, you'll be glad, just like the first time. Who knows? Maybe you'll be a big black stud this time. Depending on their stock, sometimes they let you choose nowadays."

Dake tried to laugh, but he saw Marguerite recede away from him, getting smaller and smaller. Chesty barked at him over and over again, but Dake couldn't figure out what he was trying to say.

They had set a guard on the house, but only on the street side. Dake got around him by approaching via the beach and climbing up one of the deck supports, where the slope dropped sharply away toward the ocean. He used mountaineers' grapples, the closest he could come to military issue. He had had to jettison all his gear when he made his way back through Europe.

It was dinnertime. Nobody there to not recognize him and maybe report the presence of a stranger. Sunset had reddened the sky near the horizon, and laid a sheet of orange light on the quiet waves.

He allowed himself a few moments to look at the water and remember what it had been like to live here. But that was not what

he sought. He set himself down on tiptoe on the deck planks under the trellis, then crouched motionless behind the table to look in through the French doors, as if this was a military operation.

The kitchen light was on. A woman came in. She walked so slowly and was so thin that it took Dake almost a minute to realize it was Marguerite. Chesty padded in after her, his tail at half-mast, his pace as slow as hers. Something about his eyes looked different, but Dake couldn't tell what it was from this distance.

Marguerite got a bowl and put some of Chesty's food in it. She set it down for him and changed his water. Then she sat and watched him eat from the breakfast table, while Dake watched the two of them.

Suddenly Chesty lifted his head and swung it toward the deck. Even through the glass Dake could see now that his eyes had clouded over with age. Chesty must have finally smelled him.

Marguerite turned to look and saw him. Chesty feebly charged the door, alternatively growling and barking. His claws scabbled on the glass. Marguerite rose, then backed away.

Dake put out a hand to reassure her and came to the door. "Marguerite, it's me," he said. "I'm sorry I scared you. Please, I'm sorry."

How well could she hear him? She had her arms wrapped around her middle as if to protect herself from him. He crouched down and laid his hands on the outside of the glass where Chesty was trying to get at him.

"Chesty," he said. "Easy, boy, easy."

He took off his gloves and stuffed them in his pocket. Without getting up, his gaze on Marguerite, he slowly opened the door. Chesty pushed his way out, bit him on the forearm, and held the bite. It hurt, though it didn't feel as if he'd broken the skin.

"Chesty," Dake said. "Take it easy."

Chesty gnawed at him, let go, and took a few more quick nips. He still growled. Dake opened the door wider. He held out his hand to Chesty, palm down. Chesty bit it.

"Jesus, take it easy," Dake said. Chesty sat down and growled at him just to show his confusion.

"You got me, boy," Dake said. Slowly he held out his hand again. Chesty growled but his tail wagged twice. "Come here, boy," he said.

Chesty came closer and stopped growling. Dake petted him. He licked Dake's face. Dake pulled Chesty into his arms and kissed his snout. Chesty's tail wagged.

Marguerite had come to the threshold. Dake let Chesty go and stood up.

"They told me you would probably show up," she said.

"I had to see you," Dake said. "This is the second body they gave me. The first one, it –"

"They explained," Marguerite said. "Why are you here? To get me to forgive you? Why on earth would I? Who are you to me?"

Her face worked. Dake tried not to be repelled by her wrinkles, the smell of age on her, how much she had shrunk. He kept himself still so as not to

seem like a physical threat, as if they were in a hostage situation.

"I've never stopped loving you," he said. "Remembering you is what keeps me going."

"Keeps you going as you kill more and more people?" she said. "I don't wish to be your inspiration in such an endeavor. Though I'm pleased for you that you're such a fine specimen. You look very nice with your black hair. That must be rewarding – the good looks, the vitality. Not like me. I've got six months now, that's what they told me."

Turning away, she walked slowly into the kitchen, moving from the back of one chair to another to hold herself up. Dake suppressed an urge to rush to her and support her.

She went to a drawer on the kitchen side of the island and pulled out a pill container. She poured herself a glass of water.

Dake brought Chesty in and leaned on the breakfast table side of the island. "What do you have?" he said.

She waved a hand, but it sank down again to the surface of the counter, as if lifting it had taken too much energy. "What does it matter?" she said. "I have a lack of combat experience. Thus I have a lack of access to technology that would allow me to stay alive by killing others."

Her gaze burned him though her head shook slightly, but he held it with his own.

"It's bad out there," he said. "They can't keep up with the need, command ability is spread too thin. Without the program –"

"The same," she said contemptuously. "You have a new body every few minutes, apparently, but *you* are the same. Get out."

"Are you in pain?" said Dake. He could remember so vividly being the way she was now. The exhaustion, the foreboding, the ticking clock.

Marguerite laughed. "Pain?" she said. "You must mean physical pain. Not yet. That's still to come, I'm told. All of this is what you've been spared. You must be glad."

"I don't know anymore," he said. "All I know is that it's what I did. It's no picnic, I can tell you that. Maybe it was a mistake. But it's what I did. Wouldn't you do the same if you could, now that you're sick, now that you're –"

He stopped. Marguerite smiled like someone closing in for the kill. Dake wondered that the two of them had ever been intimate. It was as if she were still thousands of miles away.

"If you had died, I would have mourned," she said. "But when someone is reborn and leaves you behind, you can't grieve."

"I thought you would understand eventually," Dake said.

She shook out two pills and swallowed them.

"I always knew you would come back," she said. "I held out as long as I could, knowing I would see you again."

She closed her eyes. Chesty began to whine. Marguerite slid down and disappeared. Dake sprang around the end of the island and caught her just as she reached the floor. She quivered in his arms.

"What did you take?" he demanded.

She managed a smile. "I took you," she said. "Poison. So easy..." Chesty howled and fled.

Chesty had gone out through the little pet door in the side of the house. In the end, when Dake realized there was no point to calling 911, that Marguerite was gone, he pulled on his gloves with shaking hands, went out the glass door again, and climbed back down the deckpost the way he had come up. The sun had just dropped over the horizon, and the water and the air were a dark

blue, the dim sky shot with a few last streaks of red. No one was about. All he heard was the sound of the waves. It was as if he were alone at the end of the universe. He staggered along the beach, calling Chesty until his voice went and all he could do was croak.

Finally he heard a faint howl and barely saw a black dot in the distance, a sitting dog who bayed at the water. It was almost dark now. He ran and caught up with Chesty. But as he did so, Chesty realized he was there and plunged into the waves.

Dake threw off his gloves and waded in. The water, a dark blue, was so icy he groaned. No coolfab to protect him here. The cruelty of the cold reminded him of the boat in the dream, where all around him had been the black cold of eternity. Chesty was out quite a way now, seemingly swimming without effort despite his age. The waves bumped Dake as he struggled against the force of them. Chesty's head, barely visible, went under.

"Chesty, no, wait!" Dake called out. "Wait for me!"

He heard something behind him, scattered voices, but he was up to his chest now and could barely breathe because of the cold. He imagined Marguerite in the boat, the dark water like ice around her, the sky black, feeling sick with terror and regret. Why had he left her?

"Chesty," he whispered.

The waves were loud, his body a leaden load of ice, slow to move, barely able to obey. His feet lifted off the bottom. He fought for stability, heaved his head and shoulders up so he could look ahead. But Chesty had disappeared.

The voices grew stronger behind him. Someone called his

"They had set a guard on the house, but only on the street side. Dake got around him by approaching via the beach and climbing up one of the deck supports, where the slope dropped sharply away toward the ocean"

name. He kept on, somehow got out to where he thought Chesty had gone down. He flailed in the water, whirled about looking. He felt with his hands under the dark surface of the water. Finally he took a great gasp of air and dove down. He opened his eyes for just a moment and thought he glimpsed something in the blackness. Maybe it was something physical, maybe not. He grasped for it and it was gone.

He surfaced. Someone had hold of him. He struggled, tried to break free so he could follow Chesty, but the hands were too forceful. The things he had done had weakened him.

Marguerite, he thought helplessly. Both of you. Let me come to you.

Too late, too late. The hands were those of a young man, powerful with life. A forearm locked around Dake's neck and he was hauled back to the beach, held down while he fought back. He screamed and screamed. Lights arrived and blinded him. Something went into his upper arm where the muscle was thick. A warmth, a slowness.

And finally, sobbing, he knew that they both were really gone. Night had fallen, and he was alone with the living.

The convoy headed out of Ürümqi at dusk in a hissing pack, like a cloud of bats emerging from underground to meet the dark. Fresh from twenty-four hours of self-celebration in the form of sexual predation and shopping, the Noropeans felt relaxed and ready for the next phase.

Dake stood in the back of one of the last transports. The rest of

the unit climbed in one at a time and ID'd themselves to him.

"Pico, Donald, sir."

Dake read the soldier's eyescan and DNA chip data to call up his record on the manifest, then passed him through. Was the boy looking at him with pity? Had his story reached this far?

"Welcome aboard, son. Take a seat."

"Mulroney, Kevin, sir. Good to see you, sir."

"Welcome aboard, son."

Next.

They would take off soon and veer off from the main convoy to head for the Kaidu He. Sheer drops waited along that river, where you could plummet down to water too dark to have a color and never be seen again. Dake's Windfucker squad, one of nine such groups, was to evaluate a peak along a two-mile stretch of the gorge and secure it prior to deployment by the main convoy, which would be mopping up Bayanbulak in the meantime. There were caves facing the river, or so the contouring had claimed. The caves were presumed to shelter an unknown number of Chinese ninjas and a lot of valuable equipment. But their priority was to kill the personnel, not save the materiel. It was the location that was paramount.

Twenty-four strong, the squad members leaned alertly against the transport hull and an interior divider. The nearest one, Torson, had his rat with him. Dake saw her nose poke out of Torson's breast pocket. One wasn't really enough, Dake knew, but one was all they were going to get.

"Stay inside, Pauline," Torson said. He pulled his chin in to look down at her, and stroked her head with his index finger.

The difficulty of the squad's task gave Dake hope. He had gotten out of Evanham's unit, thank god. Evanham's group was too tame. The Windfuckers were a confident bunch, used to taking risks.

No one here would bat an eye if he went out too far and his foot slipped.

He imagined the rush of the wind distorting his face, the brief panic, the approaching water, maybe blacking out –

He took a breath and went to pull the transport door closed, then glanced down at the manifest. He used his outgoing to call the commanding officer, who was in the front conferring with the flight crew.

"Sir," he said. "Manifest says we're waiting for one more."

He brought up the whole list and looked at the missing name. *It couldn't be*, he thought.

A woman in uniform ran toward the transport.

"Here she comes, sir," he said. "Be just a moment."

"Get it done fast," the CO said. "We need to button up."

The figure dashed into the doorway of the transport and stood gasping.

"Tomlinson, Morgan," she said.

A still place appeared in the storm that had filled Dake's chest since Marguerite's death, since Chesty and the ocean. If he hadn't been bringing up one soldier's name at a time, he would have seen her on the list earlier.

"Morgan?" he repeated.

She smiled up at him, her features more delicate this time,

with pale blue eyes. A soft wrinkle folded their outer edges in a charming way – had they designed that, or was it an accident of the process? She was shorter but still wiry, sturdy even. Spikes of pale hair poked out from underneath her cap, as if they couldn't be forced to behave.

"I got myself reassigned," she said. "Always did like the mountains. I get to sharpshoot this time, too."

She held out her chip, then opened her eyes wider.

Dake held up the eyescanner and verified her.

"All aboard, sir," he told the CO. He yanked the transport door closed. He and Morgan stood and looked at each other.

He turned off his outgoing. She turned hers off as well.

Liftup started. Instead of lurching to their seats, the two of them stayed next to the door, where the slow groan of the engine would semi-hide their murmurs. They held onto the staging straps and swayed with the transport's movements.

"Heard you went off the rails after the second go-round," she said. "AWOL. They took you out of the ocean, raving."

"Glad everybody has the story straight," he said.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Really," he said. "Nothing like that happened to you?"

She looked away. With this new body she had developed a new smile, a small one of self-amusement and deprecation.

"Not after," she said. "Before, as soon as I knew I'd have to convert again. I had to wait about a month for the new –" she gestured at herself – "for this. I had some fun while I waited. Just did anything I wanted with whoever. Civilians, obviously. What can I say? I was panicking. So I do relate."

"You seem just fine now," Dake said.

Morgan checked to see that no one was looking and put a hand on his arm. "We're the masters of life and death, remember?" she said. "We shuffle in and out of mortal coils like we're changing seasons. You can't let it throw you."

He laughed, a short sound like a bark. She took her hand away. Torson, who sat nearest the door, looked up from petting Pauline and saw that they were still talking. They couldn't afford much more.

Dake lowered his voice. "I'm thrown, Morgan," he said. "Much as I would like to have endless sex with you and your beautiful blue eyes, I must decline, because the truth is that I am thrown. Completely."

She opened her mouth to speak again, but he shook his head. He pointed, and she picked up her gear and made her way to her seat. The next time he looked, she had her face set and her gaze straight ahead.

The Windfuckers swept up the outside of the peaks lining the Kaidu He in a double column, nine transports on either side of the river. The transports spaced themselves out and hovered almost silent in the still, moonless night air while the soldiers rappelled down.

Morgan would be rearguard. She went first, dropping out the hole in the bottom of the ship with barely a glance at Dake. Dake signalled the

other drops one by one. Each figure dwindled quickly away, the soft ropes making a shushing sound distinct against the nasal hum of the transport's engine. Then the helmeted heads disappeared into the darkness of the foliage.

"Keep them together," the CO said. "I still don't buy that the area's clean. Those fuckers know this place better than we do, contouring or no contouring."

"Yes, sir," Dake said.

"Also, if there's the slightest hint of you exhibiting any emotional tendencies, I'll come down there myself and take you apart limb from limb. You're responsible for this unit, and I won't have you jeopardizing anybody in it. Do you get my fucking drift?"

"Yes, sir," said Dake.

He turned his night vision on and jumped.

The new NV had been built into all of them a month earlier, and through it the forest showed magically silver below Dake, as if he were dropping through a pillow of enchanted clouds. The trees closed around him, his feet claimed the ground, and he tugged the line, then released it. The CO pulled it up and it trailed away. The low whisper of the transport faded.

Looking around at the rest of the unit as they grouped up on him, Dake felt like someone sent back to some proto-time when moon-energy radiated from everything and everyone. But he tried to ignore the magical feeling and concentrate on the danger around them. Like everyone else in the unit, he had used the NV during training and during the long fight to take Bayanbulak. But forests were different, and a forest where you knew nothing, where an enemy could use their own version of coolfab to be invisible to the NV, where they could hide behind a tree and then step out and stab you in the eye...it made you feel hyped-up, scared, alert, even if you didn't want to go on living.

Morgan and the rest of the unit formed a huddle around him. He counted them, then signalled for them to consult their huds. He projected his own onto the ground in the center of the circle and used his fingerbright to review where they would go, the route there and the route back. He wanted to make sure everybody knew where to go, what to do, in case he got lucky and they had to come back without him. Their bowed heads, rimmed with silver, looked like praying saints in the old pictures. For a moment he swayed, feeling dislocated – *Marguerite*, he thought – and Morgan grabbed his arm to steady him.

He pulled it away, turned and led them uphill through the shimmering landscape. Mulroney, the second in command, walked behind Dake, with the medic, Siani, well back and Morgan and Pico in the rear. The trees with their thin Oriental leaves were left behind after a time, and all they could see were ferns, except where gullies erupted with bushes. All was silence and fear. Something smelled sweet as they passed it, then the aroma melted away like fog. Dake felt he could hear moisture collecting in the air.

They hiked for an hour in silence. Then he halted the unit for a few minutes. When they went on, the rocky drama of the hill rose around them, the stone giving off a soft glow in the NV.

A trail led upward steeply. Dake led the way, the unit snaking behind him. Morgan brought up the rear. Dake estimated they would reach the cave cluster in less than an hour.

Then Morgan sent him a private text that came up in bright lime green on his hud, visible only from the angle of his eyeballs: *Somebody behind.*

Dake glanced up the path ahead of them. The slope cut through

rock here, but above the little gully they would be exposed. His stomach tightened. He thumbed back his response, copying everybody in the unit: *Somebody behind us. Bunch up in this channel, sit quiet.*

The troops sank almost as one behind the rim of rock that hugged the outside of the path. Morgan and two others hung out the bottom of the line for lack of space. *Pull up, bring in rearguard,* he thumbed, and the line shifted uphill toward him, making room so Morgan, Pico and Greverson could huddle behind the trailing end of the sheltering wall. The Windfuckers quietly arranged their shoulders against each other and then fell utterly silent, hunkered like a waiting dragon.

The CO had to be right, Dake thought. Contouring was wrong – the lower reaches of the mountains were protected after all – and his squad would be picked off if they left the shelter of this little wall.

He stared down where the slope showed thinned-out growth. The heat indicators had stayed unlit, but his ears had heard something. Words from Morgan showed up on his display: *9 o'clock.*

But even before the prompt he was glancing to the left. Something, what was it, something...

A dark shape followed by another, smaller one, shifted into view below them, blurry yet containing real mass. Dake tapped his temple to jiggle the heat indicators. Still nothing. He shivered.

Running lines appeared on his display:

What is it

Jesus

« They hiked for an hour in silence. Then he halted the unit for a few minutes. When they went on, the rocky drama of the hill rose around them, the stone giving off a soft glow in the NV »

No heat but

A bear I think

Shoot it

No. Shut up. Dake cut into the lines of text and they stopped.

He watched, his limbs heavy with cold beneath the coolfab, as the shambling figures made their way through the scrub trees below. The larger one, human-shaped and upright, pushed a tree limb aside. The smaller, four-footed, stalked in the larger one's wake. They showed dark against the silvery foliage. No saints' halos here, just walking shadow.

He could hear the soldiers' breaths next to him. He could tell what they thought. They were thinking this was some new Chook technology, and wondering how to deal with it.

But Dake knew better. He knew even before the two figures stopped and turned their heads to look up at him. He knew what they were trying to tell him.

Let them go, he texted.

The soldiers sat without moving. The two figures, woman and dog, went their way, and soon the forest looked bright again.

Dake tried to tell himself it hadn't happened, that the forest was empty, just the Windfuckers and the Chinese waiting farther up the mountainside. But it had. The hair on his neck was still standing, beyond his control. He took a long breath.

Follow me.

He led the soldiers upward.

What happened back there? Morgan texted to him privately. But

Dake didn't answer.

The path twined them around the mountain, always at the same steep angle. As they rose farther above the vegetation level, they saw again below them the dream landscape of the pillowed forest canopy. Mist hovered against the mountainside. They were so high up that they could not hear the Kaidu He, but finally it appeared far beneath, a rope of water that glimmered through the gorge. The silvered humps of the other mountains floated along it atop the forest pillow. They all stopped there for a moment at a level place and took some water. Siani set down his medpack and pissed over the edge. In the utter silence, Dake heard his urine land on the rocks below.

On each of those other mountains a similar Windfucker team was making its way upward. Sometime before dawn there would be explosions, strikes surgical and otherwise, interdictions, pain and smoke, death. Eventually the sun would rise and Dake's soldiers would flip off their NV and give the smile of satisfaction the whole thing was about. Unless, of course, the Chinese knew they were coming, in which case the Windfuckers' carcasses would be tossed down to the river and forgotten. Either way, both they and the Chinese were very small, and the land and the water knew it well and watched them from afar. Even if the mountaintops had been nuked away, water would still flow and land would still be aware of them.

Dake, please talk to me about the freak show down there. It was Morgan again, texting one on one.

He didn't answer.

Do I have to speak aloud?

I'll shoot you if you do, he replied.

Fuck you, she said.

Not tonight, Dake replied.

He nudged Mulroney, who stood next to him.

Move, he texted.

The group moved. They climbed farther, until the boulders grew personalities and started looking dangerous. Dake slowed the group down and got them to crouch and wait.

He signalled Torson to move up. They knelt shoulder to shoulder. Dake pointed ahead and texted: *Send Pauline in.*

Torson took the remote out of one breast pocket and the little rat out of the other, depressed the switch on Pauline's head, and gently set her down. Dake heard a faint whisper that he knew would be Torson's prayer for Pauline's well-being. He decided not to reprimand the boy for speaking.

Pauline twitched her pointy nose backwards up at Torson, and Dake felt the same fleeting anxiety for her future, the same respect for her bravery. Of course, the remote made sure she would have no control over her actions. But maybe she was even braver because of that.

He knew what Marguerite would say if she were here. She was here, whether down below or in his mind. *Even the littlest creatures,* she would say. *Nothing escapes you, does it?* It was as clear as Torson's text on his display – *Sir, touch her head before she goes, it's good luck* – as clear as if Marguerite had shouted out loud.

And if he were to answer, what would he say? *We're all on a remote, sweetheart, we just don't know who's going to push the button, or where it will send us, or how we'll die.*

Except him, of course. He had opted out. His remote was unplugged. Which had turned out to be a problem rather than a solution.

The whole group had seen Torson's text. They waited for Dake to act. His chest heaved. Tears had come into his eyes, intensifying the NV effect. He blinked them away and put down a shaking finger to touch Pauline's smooth tiny head. He stroked her once, feeling the bump of her implant and the warmth of her flesh around it.

He texted the ritual response. *Go, little rat.*

A tiny scrabble of sound as Torson remoted Pauline forward, then silence. Dake adjusted his intake and found her signal. Her camera pointed upward at a forty-five-degree angle. The view was the old NV, which was more yellowish, like a scene shot in off-color sunshine. There hadn't been time back in Ürümqi to upgrade Pauline's implant.

Cave openings loomed above Pauline. They were set back somewhat from the path, which had widened into a small open area in front of them, like an entryway. At Dake's direction, Torson swung Pauline's head slowly back and forth, and Dake counted: three, four, five caves. Sentries at the cave mouths, sentries along the outer rim of the pathway, looking out into the huge air above the river. Eyebrows and half-domes of rock above the caves.

Two of the sentries used hand signals to converse, staying off their network. Dake had no doubt they had turned on their own version of the NV.

Put her in one of the caves, he texted.

Torson turned Pauline and made her go into the first cave. The view darkened as she entered the cave, then brightened suddenly – multiple baffle cloths had been hung across the cave mouth, making it look dark, but now that she was inside, there was a squad of Chinese on mattresses and small stools around a nice little camp light. They seemed thin but healthy enough. One slept on his back, his mouth open. Another read on his handheld. Two argued, their hand-signing exaggerated with emotion, and then the dialogue shifted and one of them grinned.

Suddenly Pauline's viewpoint rose, as if she had taken flight and were ascending to heaven. A woman's face appeared in front of her, backlit, peering close. Pauline had been picked up.

Torson controlled himself pretty well, but Dake knew the agony he must be in. Without Torson's prompting, Pauline bit the soldier's hand. The woman was not deterred. She shifted her grip to Pauline's neck and back. A finger came close and appeared to rub her head. Then her full hand closed around Pauline's head, and the signal went black.

Torson was still. Dake gripped his upper arm once. *Plan D now,* he texted to the group. *They know we're here.* He pulled on his grapples gloves and belted the clingtoes onto his boots. The rest of them did the same, except for Morgan, Pico and Siani.

Most of the squad followed Torson, scuttling

onto the rock face that overlooked the path and then scrabbling upward. Mulroney, Harty, Iparra, Greverson, Karlovsky and Akhman stayed with Dake. The Chinese shouted to each other. Dake picked up a little of what they were saying.

Hurry up, he texted.

A compressed-helium flare burst overhead and hovered in the air like a jellyfish in the ocean, pink above the silvery NV landscape, illuminating Torson and those with him and making them look as if they were crabs against the mountain rock.

Morgan, Dake texted. She threw herself against a boulder next to him and shot the flare out even as he said her name. Another went up. She got that one before it reached its highest point, making the helium explode in a loud pop.

The Chinese began firing. Still undetected, Dake let himself off the path on the downside and clung to the rock with his grapples gloves. Mulroney, Harty, Iparra, Greverson, Karlovsky and Akhman followed him. Morgan stayed put and kept Pico and Siani with her to cover her. But the flares rose now like a flock of birds, too many for Morgan to cope with. Dake felt their heat above and behind him, and particles of those Morgan had already destroyed drifted onto his head and shoulders like prickling insects. He kept going and held his breath. If the sentinels heard them and looked over the side, they would see him and the six soldiers with him clearly, but they were still shooting at Torson's group. There was a scream, and mixed cursing in English and Chinese, a war of words that punctuated the weapons fire. The Chinese would not use grenades against Torson's part of the squad because of the danger of concussion collapse.

He judged finally that he had led the way far enough along the cliff below the outer edge of the path. He paused. More screams. Some of them, he could tell, were from Torson's group. He heard moans, more firing, a thud as someone fell, probably one of Torson's group falling from the rock above the caves.

Mulroney and the others had halted. They all clung there, gripping with hands and feet, for a few seconds more.

Dake let go with one hand and pulled out a grenade. The others did the same. He made sure their eyes were all on him, then put the pin of the grenade between his teeth and let the explosive dangle, feeling its weight as if he were holding a pear stem with his teeth. The others followed suit.

Morgan, keep your head down, Dake thought. *Stay safe.*

He swarmed up the rock, plopped the top of his body onto the path, flung his legs over and got to his knees, pulled the grenade away from the pin, and lofted it into the cave on the far left. Six other grenades arced into the other caves.

The sentinels whirled at the noise they had made, but Dake dropped himself back over the edge, scrabbled for a hold on the rock, slipped, then found a grip and held it, his biceps and forearms spasming, as weapons fire at the path's edge spat shards of rock into his scalp. Out of his peripheral vision he saw the six others do the same.

Then one yelled a cry and fell, silenced instantly by the blow against the rocks farther down – was it Mulroney? Greverson?

"Shit," said Mulroney. Dake thought, *thank god.* He needed Mulroney. Yet he felt he had missed his moment. He could have let himself go, continued to slip, disappeared like Greverson. The fall would have been painful, but brief. It would have been over. Finally. But he had to know whether Morgan had survived. That was why his fingers had grabbed and clung. Now, once he knew

she was safe, he would have to find another opportunity.

A shuddering, extended, multifaceted explosion burst above them. The rock face quivered once. Dake pressed his face against the harsh stone and closed his eyes. *Morgan, stay down*, he thought.

He heard debris shoot out horizontally above him. Half the flares went out – extinguished by flying rock. Screams fell away below – the sentries, blasted from their positions. Slaggy warm particles dropped on his shoulders, a mixture of blood and flesh and shattered stone. Pauline's remains were mixed in, no doubt.

"Wait," he murmured to the others. "Wait."

Finally the debris and the hiss of falling particulates ended. Groans from above.

He took a hand away from the wall and texted privately: *Morgan*.

No reply. The walls around the still place in his chest that Morgan had made trembled.

"Mulroney, take a look," he said quietly.

Mulroney peered above the edge of the path, his form silvery from the NV and bathed in the pink of the remaining flares that hovered over them.

"Too much dust to see," he whispered, lowering himself back down like someone at the bottom of a pullup.

Dake thought a moment.

"Follow me," he murmured. He continued along the way they had come for another twenty yards, climbing upward as well as sideways in order to stay with the slope. Finally he heaved himself over the edge onto the path and lurched across it to the shelter of the boulders. The others followed. Then Dake crept down the



» Dake tried to tell himself it hadn't happened, that the forest was empty, just the Windfuckers and the Chinese waiting farther up the mountainside. But it had. The hair on his neck was still standing, beyond his control »

inside edge of the path the short distance to the remnants of the caves. It was one big opening now, a black broken mouth agape on the mountainside. A shroud of dust hung in front as if to shield the wound from view.

Dake thumped Mulroney's shoulder and pointed to the slope above. There was Torson, four squad members – including Labieritz, Siani's assistant – still with him, making their way down the rock face. They reached the boulders scattered on either side of the opening and clambered down them while Mulroney, Iparra, and Akhman ran to bracket the enlarged cave opening and cover it.

Dake texted a quick report to the CO, but even as he did it, he thought, *Morgan, where is Morgan?*

Someone crawled through the haze. Dake ran to see who it was – a Chinese, missing one foot and completely covered with blood. She shook as she pulled herself along, like a scared kitten. She seemed to be blind. Dake wondered if she was the one who had killed Pauline.

"Siani, report!" Dake shouted.

Siani was already there. He slammed a bolt of opiates into the woman's neck. She slumped onto her face and Siani started work on cauterizing her foot. If they could keep her alive, she'd be wanted when the main corps arrived.

Morgan, report.

Nothing.

"Siani, where's Tomlinson?" he said.

Siani, still working on the woman, shook his head. "Don't

know, sir," he said. "I came to look for wounded." Dake smelled a mixture of burning flesh and chemicals from the cauterization.

"Anybody see Tomlinson, report," Dake yelled, turning around to scan what was around him.

Silence. Slowly the still place in Dake's chest began to implode.

Marguerite, did you have to kill her? he thought. *She did nothing to you.*

Torson, set a guard, he texted.

Half the remaining squad members deployed to the edge of the path, while Dake dashed back down the path to where he had left Morgan, Pico and Siani. Residual dust from the explosion swirled around him in silver currents.

Down the path. Noise ahead, a grunt, then a bang and a flash. Sounds of flesh being hit, harsh breaths, heavy tottering steps. Dust drifted along with Dake, and he waved it away and groped with his hands to see better. The path fell sheer on his right. Through the haze he dimly saw the other mountains. Something twinkled far away, and then elsewhere there were sparks, barely visible.

He stumbled over someone. He knelt and heaved the body onto its back: Pico, dead, his nose gone, his face a flat muddy mass of dirt and blood. Then a noise made him stand up again. There on the path just downhill of him was Morgan, her head caught in the vise created by a tall Chinese soldier's arms. The Chinese lifted her off the ground. Morgan's eyes bulged. The upper part of her uniform was soaked with blood. More of it ran down as Dake watched, from high on her chest and her left shoulder. She stuck her right hand,

the one she could move, behind her and poked around, trying to find the man's balls. Then she made a wrenching motion as if she had found them, but the Chinese seemed to have no reaction. Dake recognized the crazed look. The man was beyond pain. He saw that Dake was there, though. He shook Morgan at Dake to show he would snap her neck if Dake got closer.

"Tsao ni ma de. Ba chiang diou sia. Gwei sia!" he shrilled. *Drop the weapon, you fuck, on your knees.*

Dake's eyes met Morgan's.

"Shoot us both," she croaked. Then her right hand fell to her side. She was almost gone.

Guys, get here fast, Dake texted.

He fell to his knees and threw away his weapon. He pointed at Morgan and called out to the man in Chinese: "Wo chiang fang sia. Ni rang ta zo." *Let her go. Look, I'm dropping my weapon.*

"Tsao! Wo hwei rang ta zo ma? Ni men Norop dou shi bai chi. Ba ni tou shang de guai dong si na diao!" *You Norop moron, you think I'm going to let her go? Take your display off your fucking face!*

Dake unwrapped the display wire and tossed the apparatus away. The Chinese loomed like a giant tree, and Morgan dangled like someone being lynched.

"Ni gei wo pa sia! Laozi bu shuang kan ni de gou yan. Shou shen zhi!" *Face down on the ground! I don't want to see your fucking eyes! Put your arms straight out in front of you!*

Dake laid his forehead and forearms on the ground. He thought he heard a dog bark nearby, and half-raised his head, but a noise from the Chinese made him put it down again.

A voice in his head pointed out that even if the Chinese didn't snap Morgan's neck, she'd be brain-damaged soon from the oxygen constriction, or bleed to death from her chest and shoulder wound.

No, he thought. She can't die, I lost Marguerite, that's enough.

Was that a sound nearby?

"Morgan!" he shouted without moving. "Morgan, stay awake, keep the mortal coil on. I take back what I said before. I take it back. Can you hear me?"

Marguerite, please, he thought. Please help me. I need you. I'll do anything, just please help me please.

"Bi zui!" the Chinese screamed at him. Shut up! Morgan gave a sickening little gurgle high up in her throat.

Then Dake heard the hard whine of weapons fire hitting something. The Chinese man's adrenaline must have drained some, because he roared a single wordless syllable of pain. Dake lifted his head. In his anguish the Chinese released Morgan and reached for his leg, half-falling.

Harty jumped down from the rocks that leaned over Dake from the left. Torson ran past Dake along the path. The two of them grabbed the Chinese. They shoved him onto his back. Torson kicked the man's leg. He screamed.

Morgan lay on the ground like a crumple of paper wetted by the rain. Dake crawled toward her. Everything seemed to be moving slowly. The

Chinese cursed in his outrage and pain, a stream

of contempt for Noropeans and all that they represented. At the edges of his vision Dake saw Siani drop to his knees next to the man and begin work on him, and after a time the Chinese stopped cursing.

But none of that was important. He had reached Morgan. He pulled her into his arms. Despite the silvery darkness he thought of being on the back deck with Marguerite in the sunshine back in California, of the beautiful moment that might have looked like death had he not fled from it.

Morgan's breathing was harsh and her eyes were closed. Had she gone into some sort of coma? Still in the slow-motion universe, Dake shook her.

"Wake up," he said. He slapped her, then raised his hand to slap her again.

From some other place, a hand stopped his. Morgan opened her eyes. "Here," she said. "Still here."

The presence swirled away, and suddenly real time took its place. Siani and Labieritz crouched next to them. Siani held up three fingers in front of Morgan's face.

"How many?" he asked, as Labieritz checked her blood pressure.

"Three," whispered Morgan.

"Good, what's your name?" said Siani. Dake eased her back down onto the ground.

"Tomlinson, Morgan, lieutenant," she said.

"Good, where are we?" Siani briskly gripped her limbs, feeling for breaks. She gasped when he found her left knee.

"Mountains," she whispered. "Heaven."

"Yes, it's lovely here, wouldn't you agree?" said Siani. He gave Morgan a quick slam of opiates and wrapped a soft splint around her knee. Then he opened her shirt and bent close to look. Finally he laid a bandage gently onto the wound and semi-closed her shirt again. He and Dake stood up and stepped away while Labieritz set up a plasma drip.

"Knee I can't do much about but keep it steady," Siani murmured. "Got to get her back. They can replace it there. But it won't matter. She's bleeding inside and out. You saw. It's bad. Nothing to be done."

Dake nodded as if Morgan were any other casualty, but he knew well enough why Marguerite had stopped his hand. After so many years of marriage, she didn't need to speak aloud, whether she was in this world or the next. *Do not torture the dying with your harsh tactics.* And whatever Marguerite had become, she had to know that Morgan was not just another soldier to Dake. Hence her pity. Hence her distance now that Dake had seen the extent of Morgan's injuries. She knew he would need time to take in the inevitable.

Siani made his arrangements. Rather than move Morgan, he had the other injured and the bodies brought to where she was. Numbly Dake texted the CO again with an updated tactical and injury report, and this time got a response. Second teams would arrive within an hour, shortly before dawn. Things had gone fairly well elsewhere along the gorge, though one team had lost sixty percent of its personnel. Dake's group had lost four in all, and another three were injured, including Morgan, for a thirty percent casualty rate. Probably among the lowest. Dake had done well, and in this unit results were all that counted.

He forced himself to focus. He sent a group with enhanced heat sensors into the remains of the caves to find any Chinese who might have somehow been shielded from the blast, and made sure the group would report back to him through Mulroney if they found anything. Then he sat on the ground next to Morgan. She slept on her back, a field blanket over her, a silver-edged,

corpse-like figure. The other injured were arranged in two rows next to her. Oano had fallen into the mouth of one of the caves when the explosions cracked off part of the upper rim, where he had been perched, and flying rock had left a massive gash in his head. It was he whom Dake had heard thud onto the ground. Siani had given him plasma, and now he was trying to stop the bleeding. He had asked Dake's permission to light an emergency lamp and crouched over Oano nearby with Labieritz assisting, their faces lit from below like old-time surgeons. The two Chinese prisoners lay bound and unconscious in the middle of the group. There wasn't much plasma for the woman, Morgan and Oano had needed so much. Siani guessed she wouldn't make it.

Everything fell quiet again. It was still dark. Dake heard only the occasional steps of the squad members nearby, and a few hushed voices from up near the caves. Some of the wounded stirred. Dake could smell their blood. Somebody had urinated in his clothes. *The body, the human body*, he thought, and shook his head. He thought he heard the river's quiet rush far below, though he knew that was impossible. Siani and Labieritz whispered to each other. There was a snip, perhaps sutures being cut, perhaps tissue.

Blood had seeped up out of Morgan and darkened the blanket over her chest. Dake bent over her and took her right hand under the edge of the blanket.

"Morgan," he said quietly. "Can you hear me?"

Her eyes, barely opened, searched for his face and registered it. Somehow their color showed up in Dake's NV, or maybe it was his memory of them: blue, like the light of morning, of the ocean, of

what it would look like: the craggy uplift of the peaks, the water snaking below, the enormous sky. The painter would have somehow captured the full presence of everything. From down in the bottom of the chasm a wind was rising, a slow quiet moan that made Dake feel lonely. And yet the sound and the feeling were sweet, the way Morgan had been sweet, trying to understand him and help him in the midst of the stupidity that was their converted lives.

He swayed, preparing to fall, to spread his arms and just let go, the thing he hadn't been able to do back in California, when the time was right and he hadn't known it. Relief filled him. He would give it all back to the larger world, the time he had used and the decisions he had made, the lives he had saved and those he had taken. He would be finished.

Near him, a shadow.

Marguerite, he thought. *I thought it mattered so much, whether I lived or died. But it doesn't, does it? We're here, and then we're not. If it's not us here, then it's someone else instead. Or no one. Do you forgive me, Marguerite? Do you forgive me for not knowing?*

He raised his arms. Then something seemed to open in him, and another presence came into him, something new and yet familiar, something he didn't recognize but should have remembered. The thing he had almost grasped in the ocean, when he went after Chesty. The thing that had eluded him all along.

A small pressure nudged his foot. It should have startled him. But he looked down almost as if he'd been expecting it.

A slender tail. Tiny finger-like toes that searched for a way around Dake's feet. A cloth cover cinched tight around the head

Someone crawled through the haze. Dake ran to see who it was - a Chinese, missing one foot and completely covered with blood. She shook as she pulled herself along, like a scared kitten. She seemed to be blind

rebirth. "Yeah," she whispered. Her breath gurgled.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Me too," she said.

"I'll miss you," he said.

She smiled. "It's my time," she said. "We thought we could choose, but we can't."

"I know," he said. "Lie still."

"I love your dog," she said, her voice suddenly clear.

Then her eyes stopped moving.

Dake suppressed a sob. He clutched her hand a moment. He couldn't help reaching out to take hold of her hair, limp now from sweat. He stroked her forehead and pressed her eyelids gently to close them, his hands shaking uncontrollably. Then he pulled the blanket up to cover her face. Siani stopped what he was doing for a moment and paused to watch. Dake shook his head. Siani looked away, then went back to work.

Dake sat awhile longer. Finally he got up and walked back up the path, past the cave opening, where now the rounded black gash stood clear against the shimmering dark gray of the rock, and climbed up to where the path curved around the mountain's bulk and he was out of sight of the others. He found a shallow ledge on the outer edge of the path and went and stood on it. He looked out over the river chasm that fell away below his feet.

It would be the last thing he would see, and he had chosen well. If some long-dead Chinese painter had depicted the ideal landscape and rendered it in silver against a background of ebony, this was

and covered with dust.

The little legs moved toward the edge. Dake bent down to prevent her from going over.

"Pauline," he murmured, picking her up. How had she found her way out, especially with her head covered like this?

He stepped backward onto the path and sat down on the dirt. He perched her on his knee, keeping her stable with the heel of one hand. As she clung to his pants, he unfastened the handkerchief that had been wrapped around her head. So small, like a miniature of the bags put over prisoners' heads in the Middle East. He'd been so sure that woman had broken her neck.

Pauline would be deaf now for sure. Whatever had protected her in the cave, the blast would have destroyed her hearing.

If he released her, she would be free of the controls on her, but some predator would eventually eat her. If he took her back, she would have more time with Torson, but she would die in combat somehow. Either way, she was alive for now. Like Dake.

He stroked her small, neat head. Her eyes glinted silver at him. He cupped her in his hands and stood up.

"Come on, little rat," he said. "They're waiting for us."

Special thanks to Jayde Lin Roberts for supplying the Chinese transliterations for this story — K.D.F. Karen D. Fishler's most recent story for *Interzone*, 'Someone Else', was long-listed for the British Fantasy Award. Her story 'Stones in Winter' appeared last spring in *Realms of Fantasy*. She is a Clarion West graduate and currently chairs the workshop's board of directors.

THE DEVILED EGG

The Tockwotton Nursing Home looked out over hundreds of acres of neighboring farmland, nowadays all fallow. In the distance the old farmstead itself loomed, a weather-beaten, tumbledown, abandoned structure.

Everywhere around the globe, farms in similar states of desuetude sprawled: untenanted, unproductive, unneeded.

All thanks to SuperEggs™.

Monteverdi Vespers, the elderly inventor of SuperEggs™, sat in his smart wheelchair on the patio at Tockwotton, considering what he had wrought.

Thirty years ago he had been so idealistic, even as he approached retirement. He had been focused on solving what appeared to be the major problem of his era: the lack of enough food for many of Earth's eight billion people.

What had inspired him to combine various tailored bacteria and viruses with the rudimentary workings of the new line of legless, wingless, headless chicken, he could not now remember. But his brainstorm had been justified by the results.

Encasing the limbless egg-layer in a box fed by a hopper and relieved by an outlet duct, Monteverdi had created the first SuperEgg™ factory. Any organic substance, from grass clippings to oak leaves to seaweed (and including the chicken's own wastes), could be fed into the grinding hopper and directly into the throat-aperture of the chicken. Controls on the box tweaked the chicken's metabolism and hormones and endocrines and proteins, producing eggs of any flavor or nutritional composition.

In one stroke, world hunger had been beaten.

Too bad Monteverdi Vespers had signed a contract assigning all his patent rights to the firm that employed him. No matter, the old man thought. He had never wanted to get rich. He had done what he had done for all humanity. But how he wished the charity nursing home he had ended up in didn't recycle its dead residents through his invention!

MADAME CALIVERA'S CORPORATE IDENTITY PROGRAM

The spaceship resembled a giant metallic carrot with three legs sprouting from its narrow end. It touched down on the barren plains of the planet designated by humans as Limpdick III, striking a gout of dry dust from the surface. After a short interval the ship disgorged a land-crawler whose front grille mimicked the grimace of the rock-eating lizards of Why The Fuck Are We Here. The crawler set off across the plain, raising clouds of cinders and soil particulates.

Fifteen minutes of travel brought the crawler to a native village: a collection of mismatched huts flanked by rudimentary benches and fire pits and rubbish heaps. On the benches sat various natives of Limpdick III: repulsive green warty indolent trolls with enormous genitalia. The penises of the males and the labial folds of the females flopped over the edges of the benches and into the dust.

A door in the crawler gull-winged open, and a human woman emerged. Clad in a black and white skintight business suit, the woman exhibited an imperious air. Unhesitatingly, she stalked over to the nearest native, a male.

"Where's Drongo Kaboom?"

The troll used both hands to shift his dick to avoid a line of creeping insects. "I am Drongo Kaboom."

"Did you enroll in the home-study Master of Business Administration program from Harvard University?"

"Yes, that I did."

"And did you realize that your tuition payment was drawn on a non-human bank account that paid Harvard only in the dried skins of puke-cats?"

"The puke-cat is our global currency."

"Furthermore, do you acknowledge that every one of your term papers has been plagiarized off the Interstellar Internet?"

"Why should I strain my delicate brains when stealing is much easier?"

"Lastly, do you admit enticing a female freshman from Brookline, Massachusetts, all the way out to Limpdick III with promises of a 'monster kegger' and then leaving her stranded halfway to the Magellanic Clouds, covered in quarts of your jizm?"

"I have recordings indicating all relations were consensual."

The woman glared at the troll for a moment, then broke into a smile and extended her hand. "Mister Kaboom, you're just the material Harvard Business School is looking for! How's tenure sound to you?"

THE CLASH OF HOLIDAYS

Today was little Jimmy Maynard's favorite day of the year.

The one day of the year that wasn't a stinkin' holiday.

Sleepless for most of the night,

Jimmy got up extra early because he was so excited. Today he could go to school and do his chores! He could eat the plainest of foods! He could dress in simple clothes! He could skip any kind of holiday craft-making!

What a glorious prospect!

His house would be undecorated for a wonderful twenty-four hours, free of any holiday regalia. No Christmas tree, no Easter eggs, no Thanksgiving papier-mache turkeys, no Secretary Day's steno-pad napkins. No visitors would pop in bearing holiday greetings or traditional gifts, such as the candy pistols of NRA Day. The mail would bring no cards, the television would show no specials.

What more could a kid want?

Jimmy took his time dressing, savoring the feel of his non-holiday clothes. He went downstairs, gratified not to smell Kwanzaa cookies or matzoh balls. Maybe he'd have just some dry toast for breakfast, or cereal eaten by the handful straight from the box. He anticipated the easy smiles his mother and father would wear as they were spared for just one uniquely un-special day from church-going or shopping or parading.

Bursting into the kitchen, Jimmy was suddenly distraught to see his parent's crestfallen faces.

"Mom! Dad! What's the matter?"

"Jimmy," said his Dad, "you'd better sit down. I don't know how to tell you this, but the government has just declared a new holiday –"

Jimmy screamed, as visions of sugar-plums danced in his head.

THE FUGUES ARE ON PAGES
8-11, 28-31, 49-51, 56-57

« The spaceship
with three legs

THE SPECTRE OF CARTOON APPEAL

1 Artist Number One Hundred and Fifteen, they called him. A skinny kid in shorts and
5 an outsized Raiders t-shirt, with his glossy black hair in a crude bowl cut, the Hmong boy labored day and night in one of the evil Southeast Asian cartoon sweatshops, drawing cel after cel of American animation. So stuffed was his head with the uncouth imagery of his distant employers that he had forgotten all his native rituals and customs, his family, and even his own name. Taken by outlaw recruiters from his village after exhibiting drawing prowess at an early age, he was now and forevermore only Artist Number One Hundred and Fifteen.

Artist Number One Hundred and Fifteen's best friend, naturally enough, was Artist Number One Hundred and Sixteen, who occupied the drafting table and rickety, unpadded bamboo stool next to Fifteen. A kidnapped Korean, Sixteen did not even speak the same language as Fifteen. And yet they had managed to form a bond of friendship, each one helping the other. Some days Fifteen would massage Sixteen's aching wrists, while other days, Sixteen would share some of his ration of dried cuttlefish and counterfeit Pocari Sweat drink with Fifteen, who, after all, was still a growing boy, while Sixteen was an old man who had been drawing cartoons since the heyday of *Tom and Jerry*.

One day the cel-master stomped in, visibly outraged. The brawny, brutal overseer, a former Thai pirate known for his cruel way with the lash, clutched in his hand the printout of an e-mailed communique from the Cartoon Network in America. Artist Number One Hundred and Fifteen could recognize the letterhead. The Thai slavedriver shouted in pidgin English, the de facto language of the international bullpen.

"Who the motherfuckin' funny guy? Who put graffiti slur against Thai King in background of *SpongeBob*? Big riots all across American Thai communities. Plenty shit now to go around for everyone!"

None of the artists dared speak. The cel-master whirled on Artist Number One Hundred and Sixteen.

"Maybe it you, old man! Or maybe you know who! Either way, time for you to get whipped!"

Artist Number One Hundred and Sixteen's heart gave out after the tenth lashing. The Thai boss kicked the corpse, had it hauled unceremoniously away, then said, "You goddamn buggers all think on this! I be back in the morning to find out who really guilty!"

Locked in their dark, stifling, stenchy bunkhouse with his comrades, Artist Number One Hundred and Fifteen cried for two hours for the death of his only friend. But then he wiped his eyes and resolved to take revenge.

From the near-obliterated depths of his memory came the details of certain arcane rituals of his people. Fifteen set out to perform them. They involved nothing more than some bodily fluids, a handful of dirt, a lizard bone saved from supper, a pencil stub wrapped in cobwebs and a scrap of paper.

In the morning the artists cowered, awaiting the arrival of the cel-master and his whip. But he never showed. By noon, with their bladders bursting and stomachs growling, they dared cautiously to break out of the bunkhouse.

They found the overseer and the other bosses flattened to a lifeless two-dimensionality, as if they had been run over by a large macadam-smoothing machine. Incredulous at their good fortune, the artists dispersed, each making for home.

Back in his village, Artist Number One Hundred and Fifteen reunited with his family and soon was reintegrated into the ancient ways. He never spoke of his period of slavery, and showed little interest in matters outside his village.

Years later, a charity package of drugs with expired shelf lives arrived from the USA. The contents were protected with recent newspapers. Smoothing one out, the young man who was no longer Artist Number One Hundred and Fifteen saw pictures that made him smile.

Even now, years later, the American authorities seemed to be having trouble rounding up all the slavering, gibbering, whirling Tazmanian Devils that had slaughtered all those studio executives.

THE SPECTRE OF MONSTER APPEAL

1 Putting a point on his claws with the wall-
6 mounted sharpener, Furry Hackerman began pasting up the latest issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. He employed his claws to spike various articles in anticipation of immediate need. At one point in his compositional routine, when all his claws held multiple articles, and other gluey snippets had stuck accidentally to his hairy form, Hackerman the editor looked as if he had fought a battle with the Sunday edition of the *Monsterville Times* and lost.

Hackerman's furry, fanged, fiery-eyed face wore a look of intense concentration. He was trying to decide which piece would be the lead this issue.

Should he go with GREEDY CORPORATE EXECUTIVES SUCK BLOOD OF STOCKHOLDERS OF ANCIENT MALE SENATORS FORCE WOMEN TO GIVE BIRTH TO UNWANTED BABIES?

The first item focused on the new Roger Goreman film, *Corporations Ate My Future!* A real thriller-diller, starring those hairless apes which had suddenly become Hollywood's latest monster of the moment. Of course, no hairless apes actually existed any longer in Hackerman's world. The players in these films were all shaved werewolves (Hackerman's own species) or giant salamanders with many prosthetics and much makeup or trolls in rubber suits. But the very memory of these so-called 'humans' and their incredibly bizarre society as it had once existed in genetic isolation on the island of Madagascar was still potent enough to generate boffo box-office.

The second item related to John Carpenter-Ant's *Legislature of Hell!* Another hairless ape spooktacular. There were some really effective scenes here of humans drooling as they affixed their signatures in blood to the deadly legislation. Those shots would play well with Hackerman's juvenile audience of young ghouls and goblins.

In the end, Hackerman went with *Legislature of Hell!*

Hours passed as the editor continued to paste-up the issue. Around eleven, his secretary entered, bearing a steaming cup of grue. Trixie Frankenstein's tall column of lightning-streaked hair barely cleared the doorframe.

"Furry, it's time for your break. You'll work yourself senseless if you go on like this."

"Hey, baby, life's short. I'll sleep when I'm undead!"

resembled a giant metallic carrot
sprouting from its narrow end »

THE CYCLOPEAN POTENTATE

Hazel Dimpflmaier, sitting alone in the sunny plaza outside the office building where she worked, bit into the big juicy Macoun apple she had packed for her lunch.

1 Much to her surprise, her first chomp revealed not the undifferentiated pulp of a
7 real apple, but an intricate structure of equipment-filled rooms. And the rooms were occupied by scores of worms!

Hazel gagged and spit out most of the unchewed remnants of her mouthful of faux fruit. But she did not immediately hurl the mock-apple away from herself, somehow hypnotized by the activity within.

The tiny limbless worms were scurrying about, pulling various levers with their mouths and striking various buttons on their equipment with the accurate tips of their tails. Hazel could hear their little piping voices shouting encouragement and warnings and damage reports.

Eventually, one worm emerged from the confusion and crawled up to the top of the apple, to perch on the fruit's outer skin where it boldly confronted Hazel.

This worm wore a distinctive hat which, Hazel intuited, marked it as the leader. It exhibited an exceedingly ugly face, mostly human save for the fact that one big cyclopean eye dominated its visage. A hairy soul-patch decorated the worm's chin.

The worm opened its mouth and shouted, resulting in a sound of the magnitude of a cricket chirping. Amazingly, it spoke English. "Cruel human! You have destroyed our ship! Now we will never be able to return to our home in the Coalsack Nebula."

Hazel glanced about to make sure none of her co-workers were present to see her addressing a piece of fruit, then answered, "How – how was I to know? Your ship looked just like an apple!"

The cyclopean worm looked disconcerted. "An apple? Our orbital probes to your world revealed no such edible counterpart to our ship. I will be shortening those responsible for this gaffe by at least two segments!"

Hazel had begun to feel somewhat more at ease with these harmless tiny visitors from space, and now contemplated how best to ease their plight. "Don't worry about anything. Mankind will be happy to offer you a new home here."

The worm captain grinned in a horrifying fashion. "That is only just. We are quite pleased that you will not be putting up any resistance. I have just received reports from two of my crew whom you swallowed, and they report that your intestinal tract is some of the most agreeable real estate they've ever seen!"

BUNNY DUCK

The office to the Prime Minister of North America was guarded by a hideous two-headed monster, the PM's combination spokething and bodyguard. Created by an international consortium of biofabbers, the guardian of the PM's privacy and safety combined salient parts of a dozen genomes. From the basepairs of a famous TV talkshow host, the scientists had isolated the genes for persistence and obliviousness to the emotions of others. From the cells of a ferret they had taken slinkiness and slipperiness factors. From a duck they had stolen a feathery hide that would repel anything. From a pit bull they had lifted jaws that would clamp with enormous pressure and never relent. From a hare they had taken a beguilingly innocent visage to conceal the creature's harsher qualities and disarm any supplicants or intruders. And so on and so on.

The dual heads were a feature designed mainly to allow the spokething to utter contradictory statements simultaneously. For many years the spokething functioned admirably in its role, disseminating official lies, spinning the truth and rending to bloody bits anyone who dared to approach the PM unbidden.

1 But one day, as could have been predicted by any mythographer, a hero showed up to
8 conquer the monster. This hero looked like a typical female TV journalist, fashionably attired and coiffed. She did not carry a sword or laser pistol or bomb, but only the tools of her trade. Meeting the two-headed spokething for her appointed interview, the journalist positioned her microphone midway between the two mouths of the beast and asked her poisoned question. "Which one of you has better access to the Prime Minister?"

The two mouths immediately blurted out contradictory responses. Two conjoined heads swiveled on rubbery necks to glare at each other, claws extruded from separately controlled paws, and within minutes the spokething lay dying from a thousand self-inflicted wounds.

The journalist skipped elegantly aside to preserve her Manolo Blahniks from the runneling blood, faced her cameraman and said, "Later on *Entertainment Tonight*, we'll look at my appointment as the Prime Minister's new representative, under the rule of the Golden Bough."

THE HYDRA OF MADISON AVENUE

Harry Yankdollar was sitting in his luxurious fifty-fifth-floor office at Yankdollar Bleach Hobbleshoot and Drupp when the small flying saucer zoomed in through his open window. The pale blue, glitter-flecked, bubble-canopied saucer was approximately as big as an amusement park ride for toddlers and contained exactly one purple-hued, wild-eyed, grinning alien.

His mouth wide as that of a housewife presented with news of the inferiority of her favorite detergent, Harry jerked backward in his Aeron chair as the saucer settled to the thick carpeting of his office. The bubble canopy retracted and the stubby alien stepped out.

"Yankdollar, you can call me Quisp. My race has been monitoring the broadcast advertisements produced by your firm, and we're here to hire you for a big campaign."

Harry's pulse slowed and he regained his composure. The alien's words had restored him to familiar ground. So what if the client sported a single propeller-tipped shaft from the top of its head? A campaign was a campaign, and the client was always right. "What's the product?" inquired Harry. "And more importantly, what's the budget?"

"The product is a service, so to speak. It's the enslavement of your entire species by my kind. We need you to make this program semi-palatable to your fellows, to diminish their resistance. And the budget is commensurate, as you'll discern from your personal fee. You'll receive ten-thousand kilotons of prime dark matter and a small habitable moon to which you may retire to escape the hatred of the race you will betray. Do we have a deal?"

Harry considered for only a few moments. "This dark matter – is it the regular medium of exchange across the galaxy?"

"Indeed. One ounce is sufficient to purchase the services of thirty skilled Rigellian lemur-whores for a week."

"And this habitable moon – does it have any nasty surprises on it?"

"By no means. It was formerly the vacation home of the Exarch of the Pleiades, and you know *his* discriminating tastes!"

"Right, sure. Hmmm... Okay, I'm your man for the job."

"Excellent!" Quisp removed a sidearm from a holster and aimed it at Harry.

"Hey! Wait one commercial minute! What's going on?"

"Merely a formality to insure your continuing compliance and inability to change your mind. This gun is a Mark Three Soul Stealer. The capture and removal of your soul will insure your obedience."

Harry shrugged. "Fire away. The guy from the tobacco industry used a Mark Four, and I didn't feel anything at all."

DIG SKIN GLORY

Starrzell 'Screamer' Scripsack emerged from his final NFL game a quadriplegic. And his team lost as well.

2 Starrzell's legendary on-the-field endurance and spirit failed him in his new role of helpless cripple. The contrast between his old high life of worship by fans and women, recreational drugs, and physical glory and his new low life of abandonment by sycophants and tarts, pain-killing drugs and physical decrepitude just rankled too much for him to buck himself up. He dissipatedly forced himself through rehab, and then, the first time he was alone for ten minutes in his new handicapped-modified apartment, he rammed his puff-tube-activated electric wheelchair into the side of a therapeutic Jacuzzi, pitched forward and drowned.

Starrzell awoke in the afterlife restored to his prime condition, and he knew he was in Heaven. He stood, suited up, in the middle of a playing field. The stands were filled with roaring fans, every last one of whom was himself a former football great, and the cheerleaders were all stark naked.

But where were his teammates? So far, Starrzell was all alone on the turf, save for a football resting on its perch. Maybe competitors and comrades were just waiting for him to kick off before materializing? Starrzell couldn't see anything else to do. So he loped forward, muscles flexing to send the football arcing upward.

Just as he drew his foot backward, the football changed to the living head of his mother. His mother who had died a charity case in the worst hospital in Chicago while her son was partying at the Playboy Mansion West.

Unable to stop his programmed motion, Starrzell kicked the screaming head of his mother perfectly through the goalposts.

Suddenly he was back in the position where he had first appeared, and another football awaited him midfield. Dumb as he was, Starrzell knew what would happen once he came within striking distance of the football, and he tried to depart the field. But the naked cheerleaders morphed into skeletal warriors that barred his exit.

Resignedly, Starrzell returned to the field, where he jogged listlessly at the pigskin – which changed at the final moment into the head of his high school coach, whom Starrzell had cuckolded on numerous occasions.

After that, there came an endless succession of all the people Starrzell had injured during his lifetime. One by one, the ranting, cursing, begging heads went sailing through the goalposts, racking up points on the stadium scoreboard. And when a seeming eon had passed, and all of Starrzell's accusatory victims had been booted once, the cycle returned to the start, with his mother once more.

Several infernal kalpas passed before a halftime show intervened.

And even then, the marching band was hideously out of tune and the Gatorade burned like brimstone.

TAR PIT KITTY

The perfection of the Liminality Stargate allowed mankind to colonize the galaxy.

2 But this invention also insured that the ultimate pattern of segregated communities would result.

1 Escape from detested unbelievers of any stripe required nothing more than a single step through any gate to a congregation of welcoming, like-minded fellows.

Homogenous planets full of identical-thinking dittoheads became the rule.

There were planets full of fundamentalist Christians and ones full of Koran-quoting Muslims; planets of Republicans and planets of Democrats; planets of Trekkies and planets of romance readers.

Some of the affinity groups pushed the limits of trifling distinctions. One star-system was devoted solely to Neil Diamond fans.

But there were two worlds that hosted radically antipathetic groups which could never under any circumstance coexist.

Cat-lovers and cat-haters.

The inhabitants of Ailurophobe IV maintained strict quarantine over all their Stargates. Newcomers were wanded down with sensitive detectors and, should so much as a single cat hair or flake of catnip be detected on them, they would be summarily returned whence they came. The 'border' guards of Ailurophile VII subjected visitors to a comparable test: exiting from the Stargates, all new arrivals were forced to cuddle without flinching the most dander-producing, long-haired, insolent felines available.

Naturally enough, given human nature, the two camps were not content merely to exist separately from their hated enemies. No, they each wanted to convert or eliminate the heathens.

Over the decades, many tactics had been tried without success by both sides. The stalemate seemed destined to persist forever. But then the scientists of Ailurophile VII had an inspiration. They created transgenic beings who, to all outer appearances, were incredibly sexy humans but whose genomes in reality were comprised of seventy-five percent feline genes.

Having raised up hundreds of thousands of these dumb but irresistible double agents with accelerated growth techniques, the Ailurophilians launched them en masse through the gates at their enemy.

The cat-people represented themselves as traders, tourists, immigrants, visiting scholars and converts to the anti-cat cause. Within weeks, they had infiltrated every strata of Ailurophobic society, with the mission of interbreeding with the Ailurophobes and, over the long run, rendering them extinct.

The Ailurophilians sat back and waited eagerly for reports of victory, as signalled by a wave of cat-baby births.

After nine months of silence, one of the cat-people returned. Looking as marginally chagrined as only a cat can, the agent reported the total failure of the invasion.

"But what went wrong?" demanded the Ailurophilian leaders. "Didn't you mate with the natives?"

"We did," said the returned agent, licking one hand and using it to smooth back the hair behind his ear. "But as soon as the kittens were born, we cat-fathers killed all the males and even then the cat-mothers didn't have enough teats to nurse those that remained."

«The inhabitants of Ailurophobe IV maintained strict quarantine over all their Stargates»

THE FUGUES ARE ON PAGES 8-11, 28-31, 49-51, 56-57

INTERMISSION

STORIES • AFTER THE PARTY by RICHARD CALDER • ILLUSTRATED by DAVID SENECA



AFTER THE PARTY

a nymphomaniad by richard calder



part three: shocking pink

'This is the wage of the fellatrix Sin Drunk on the icy death-sperm of the Devil.'

Aleister Crowley, *Clouds Without Water* (1909)

This is the final part of Richard Calder's novella.

Richard was born in 1956, in Whitechapel, London. In the mid seventies he read English Literature at the University of Sussex. After graduating he travelled extensively throughout South-East Asia and Australia and, upon returning to the UK, subsequently worked in bookselling, independent television and the American Embassy's press office. He became a full-time author in 1990 after moving from London to Nongkhai, Thailand, a border town overlooking Laos. In 1998 he moved to the Philippines, where he lived for some years in Baguio City. After returning to London, he currently resides in another 'East' – his native East End. His novels include the 'Dead' trilogy (*Dead Girls*, *Dead Boys*, *Dead Things*), *Cythera*, *Frenzetta*, *The Twist*, *Malignos*, *Impakto*, and *Lord Soho*. (A live-action/anime film adaptation of *Dead Girls* is currently in development.) His latest novel is *Babylon*, to be published by PS Publishing in April 2006.

He sat before her vanity table. On top of it stood a porcelain bowl and ewer, pots of rouge, kohl, rice powder, antimony, coral, pomade and other cosmetics, a bottle of lanolin and a bottle of French perfume, and a pile of bows, ribbons and hairpieces.

Her toilette complete, she looked in her mirror and inspected the finished product, a Cat fresh off an assembly line dedicated to the mass manufacture of girls. She smiled, and the simulacrum from Looking-Glass Land smiled back, not the old Cat at all, but one transformed who seemed ready to step out of her own, more perfect world, and at last displace the shy, gauche creature who had too long denied her her place.

She had never really been a girl before, she decided. She had been the three-dimensional shadow of a girl. To be a true girl her old self would have to die. Only then would she achieve the purity of a reflection and become a representation of herself.

She was dressed in pink. For millennia, red, or more properly speaking, the shade of red commonly called scarlet, was the traditional colour associated with prostitution, both sacred and profane. But in the modern world pink – the colour that expressed both innocence and corruption – had come to be seen as more daring, if usually deemed suitable only for *pornae*.

She stood up.

"I'm a pink girl," she whispered to herself, "a sick, sick kitty."

Her pink satin gown was scandalously brief, its knee-length hemline distended by a mass of lace-trimmed petticoats. The gown was expensive. She had had it made for the *hieros gamos* ceremony that took place on Babylon every Beltane. It was her bridal gown, the dress that would twirl about her thighs when she would dance about the May Pole in celebration of the marriage of Ishtar with the kings of the Earth.

But tonight she would dance for her own king, and twirl, gyrate, reel and writhe about another pole, another phallus.

She ran her hands over her waist and down her hips. Her corset was agreeably tight; along with the side-buttoned, high-heeled ankle boots, it threw her torso into a classic S-shaped configuration, so that she was all jutting bosom and pert, upraised behind.

She adjusted her bonnet – pink with a black gauze half veil stippled with pink spangles – and drew closer to the mirror, evaluating the thick patina of paint that covered her face. The eyelids were pink, like the rest of her ensemble, and as hard and glossy as enamel. The lashes – each one resembled the tooth of a broken comb – had been treated with soot mixed with coral and glue. Pink rouge decorated her kittenish cheekbones. And the lips were a plump citrus oozing juice, zest, and pink sap.

"Oh, well, look at the blushing bride!" said Emily, who had just stepped into the changing room after concluding her performance in the saloon. She wore a black peignoir that was so long that it trailed behind her like the train of a dress.

"Well, look at Miss Pinky!" said Lydia, the girl who followed and who was identically attired.

"You vada her new Frenchman?" said Emily.

"Yeh, he's a bone-anza," said Lydia.

"Bone-anza?" said Emily, raising an eyebrow. "He's the fucking lunchpack of Notre Dame."

"Ooo! Can I blag him, too?" said Lydia, creeping up behind Cat and tickling her ribs.

"Hook it," said Cat, brushing away the girl's fingers.

"Well, let's not battyfang about it, heartface," said a discountenanced Lydia.

"Leave the daffy little moppet be," said Emily. "She's a twink. Always has been." She walked over to Lydia and pulled her away, forcefully sitting her down at the vanity table reserved for her use. "It's the shy ones you have to watch out for. They always want to be pinker than thou. Don't dilly-dally with her. She's on the turn. And dollies on the turn are trouble."

Ignoring them, Cat walked to the corner of the room where a low, makeshift altar had been erected. She knelt before it, thighs pressed together and with her feet tucked under her rump so that the long, thin heels of her boots created declivities in each spread buttock. Two sticks of incense burnt to either side of an empty bowl. Behind the bowl was the brass image of a cobra rampant, and arrayed about it, a milk jug and a saltcellar.

She lifted her eyes towards the ceiling. Above the altar, hanging from the cracked plaster of the wall, was a cheap crucifix bathed in the sickly green light of a naked gas jet.

She picked up the jug, poured a few drops of milk into the bowl, set the jug down, and then took a pinch from the saltcellar. She sprinkled it over the bowl so that milk and salt co-mingled.

Satan was to be feared and placated. But the dark, erotic arts of Babylonian phallicism taught that he could also be mocked and controlled. She gazed up, higher, towards the crucifix. It symbolized man broken upon the *crucis lingam* of his own sexuality. The Magdalene had seduced and enslaved the Son of Man. *Noli me Tangere*, he had said. But in the end, she had killed him, for it was in the power of all catgirls to defile, manipulate, and if necessary, destroy the masculine exterminating principle: the rule of intellect that had so long condemned the world to horror, bloodshed, and war.

"Grant me the promise of your covenant," she whispered, gazing higher still to where, perched on a bracket above the crucifix, stood a wooden, gaudily painted statuette of the Goddess in the form of Venus Volgivava, a street girl. And Cat reminded herself that Our Lady was the protector, not just of *horae* and the priestesses of the great temples, but of common prostitutes like herself. She dipped her head. "Oh Satan, let me taste your venom." She extended her tongue and lapped at the salty milk. Drawing back, she wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, smearing it with milk and coral. "Divest me of womanhood," she continued. "And perfect my nature. Make me a whore fit to serve you."

Her ears pricked to the click-clack of heels. She twisted about half believing Lydia might be trying to sneak up on her to vent her spite. A few nights ago Lydia had hidden Lizzie's bonnet. And last week, she had pushed Juliet off her stool after the poor girl had thought to offer advice on how she might improve her routine. Lydia, however, still sat at her table; the girl who approached was Abigail St Adelle, a twenty-one-year-old cocotte.

"I thought it was supposed to be your night off?" she said.

"It is," said Cat, confidence swiftly draining from her. "It's just that –"

"She's got herself a beau," said Lydia.

"Has she now?" said Abigail, who belonged to *Le Sphinx*, a *maison de rendezvous* in Covent Garden, but who was on secondment to *Little Miss Muffet's* to ensure its girls met their religious obligations. "Well, she needs to work. I haven't seen a tithe for weeks." She turned to Cat. "I'll have to inform my Abbess," she added, crossly. "You'll be disciplined, you know that." She knotted, and then re-knotted, the sash that cinctured her peignoir. "You simply *must* keep up with your tribute!"

Cat got up and, as calmly as she could, walked past her. She walked past them all, heedless of their stares and hisses. That night, she had changed. She was still Cat, the shy, quietly spoken girl; but something deep inside her had ruptured and left her ruined more comprehensively than she had ever dared think possible.

She was glad. Glad that her hymen was intact, but that she had submitted to another, more evil, deflowering. Her eyes had opened. She was a pink girl, the whore she had always known herself to be, destined to live the life that until now had been denied her. And if considered beyond the pale, and subsequently despised by other, less depraved, Babylonians, and unreservedly hated by the men of the Black Order who used her kind with special cruelty, she felt beyond censure. Tonight she would be saved. Tonight she would achieve immortality.

It was her moment.

"Give my regards to His Satanic Majesty," said Lydia as Cat opened the door and walked out of the changing room and into the saloon, "*petite belle salope sans merci*."

After an interlude of comparative silence someone had fed the Pianola another roll of paper and the saloon was filled with the rattle and crash of ebony and ivory. Men cheered. Girls shrieked. But Nicodemus was struck dumb. Cat had made her entrance. And the spell that she had used to bewitch him consolidated its hold, squeezing his heart so that it ached with a longing he had not felt since childhood.

She had approached the pole as if she were travelling on the Trans-World Express, Babylon unfolding from the interstices of Earth Prime until the familiar world disappeared in a blue-white flash and all about her were the lineaments of the Goddess: courtyards, piazzas, monumental statues of Ishtar, Lilith, Isis and Aphrodite, and, of course, the great Babylonian temples, some abandoned, some in ruins, but many, of course, still in use, like her own, St Agatha's, the great neo-Gothic pile that overlooked a crashing, purple sea, in whose hallowed cloisters she and her sisters renewed their pledges to whoredom.

She stood still, presenting the audience with her monobosomed profile. Then, placing one hand on the pole to steady herself, she turned to face the men who crowded the stage's perimeter and began to dance.

It was the May Queen's dance, the dance of the Beltane, a celebration of the power Ishtar conferred upon Her earthly representatives. But it was also a dance of death. It celebrated the martyrs. And if it began conventionally enough, like a dance a non-Babylonian might have performed if London had still had saloons that employed such girls, then it soon became something different.

A girl in a Gainsborough hat climbed up on top of the mechanical piano. She began to sing, bawling out the words in a manner worthy of a rougher, less tuneful Marie Lloyd:

"Eve was so very curious, she fingered Adam furious,
Till he dibbed in with might and main his root, root, root;
Said Eve, I do not know, but I think the thing will grow,
Because I most distinctly felt it shoot, shoot, shoot."

Cat rocked her hips apathetically, as if making a sour, rather dismissive comment on the potency of the lyrics. And with a feigned show of boredom, she squatted and splayed her thighs. But when she resumed a standing position her apathy evaporated, her pelvic girdle manically transcribing some two-dozen circles and loops. Once more she presented the audience with her profile, then strutted to the opposite side of the pole (and so ostentatiously that a long, slim heel made contact with her buttocks after each step) and eased her dress off her shoulders. The men whistled. Cat smiled, and rolled down the top of her bodice. As whistles gave way to vulgar exhortations, she placed her hands on the back of her head and displayed – for the first time that night – the full, riotous extent of her voluptuousness.

She wore a waspie, the new style of corset fashionable with girls who didn't need the support of the older, overbust corset. Made out of satin and coutil and boned with thin stays, it not only compressed her waist into a perfect circle but elevated the bosom, so that her breasts appeared to surge in the 'pouter-pigeon effect' that so obsessed and tormented him.

Nicodemus took out his cigarette case. He flipped open the lid with one hand and removed a cigarette with the other, and then stared at the stage with redoubled intensity.

Her breasts were a culinary phenomenon, a monumental double helping of blancmange scooped, sculpted, squeezed into a quivering *pièce d'occasion* and served up on a platter. But if they were a confection, then they were meat, too, and their thrusting, overstated carnality offered such a stark contrast to the childlike, delicately pretty face, that they seemed grafted, belonging ultimately to not merely somebody else, but someplace else, and imposed on this young, innocent girl in the same way that her

pathological sexuality had been imposed: through the monstrous act of cultural violence known as *Babylon*.

She let her dress and white glacé petticoats fall about her ankles. She stepped out of them: a pocket Venus naked but for her gloves, waspie, drawers, stockings and ankle boots rising from a meringue-like sea of satin and lace.

He picked up the box of matches that lay on the side table and proceeded to light his cigarette. Then he leaned back in his chair, let a smoke ring escape his lips, and offered himself up to enchantment.

Her silver coin belt jingled against her abdomen as her pelvis rotated in the classic figure eight of the *danse du ventre*. The coins – emblematic of whoredom – glittered in the limelight, playing over her womb and rededicating its despised biological function to Ishtar in prayerful hope that one of Her daughters might be fruitful, not with child, but with the capital of men, the hard currency of passion spent and wasted.

In the last six months alone she had spent £2.6s on stockings, petticoats and stays. She was particularly proud of her waspie with its chic abdominal vent. *Déshabillé* she thus revealed not only her breasts, but more importantly, her navel. It was adorned by a piercing: a silver communion ring inscribed with the words *Credo In Satanum*. For a Babylonian whore, the umbilical scar – symbol



of original sin and mark of the witch – represented the wellspring of sexual magic by which Ishtar enslaved mankind.

“They hardly had the time to wipe away the slime,
When God down on ‘em like a hammer bore, bore, bore;
And caught the guilty pair with flushed face and tumbled hair,
And an enormous fig-leaf poultice clapped before-ore-ore.”

She performed hip thrusts, flutters, drops, swings and ribcage slides, offering herself up as man-fodder. And her navel – winking with each contraction of her abdominal muscles – met the collective gaze of her male audience with insolent defiance. And what a lot of mutton-chopped old poon-dogs they were, thought Cat, as she strutted to the left side of the stage, turned about, crossed her ankles, bent over, and then slowly slid her drawers down her legs. She stood upright and stepped out of them, just as she had her dress. And then she bent over once again, her legs wide, the seams of her black stockings pointing towards the pink, plush interior of a girl who not only flirted with pinkness, but who had PINK running through her just as if she were a piece of seaside rock.

As applause mixed with the Pianola’s raucous sol-fa-mi-o she strutted across to the farther side of the stage to squat, roll over on her back and scissor her legs in the air.

Floor work completed, she slithered towards the pole on her belly, gazing up at it with a mixture of fear and adoration.

They tease and mock us, he thought, as she prepared to work the pole. They say: This is what you do, but you can’t do it to us. Not now. Not here. Not on Earth Prime. And yet whenever Nicodemus watched a girl perform, he always felt that, over and above being presented with a spectacle of sexual defiance, he was being importuned, as if the girl were unconsciously crying out for justice.

Cat had her fingers entwined about the pole’s chromium shaft, licking the gleaming metal as fervently as she would a client.

Facing her audience, she took a firm hold, pulled herself up onto her feet and wrapped her legs around the pole’s cool perpendicularity. Then, making a little jump into the air, she twirled like a child playing on a roundabout. Coming to a stop, she placed a finger in her mouth and cursorily sucked it before again grasping the pole with both hands. Slowly, she climbed, one hand over the other, until, suspended by her wrists, she faced the audience imitating the pose of a Sadeian heroine, her feet some three to four feet above the floor.

Though she may laugh, cry, grow petulant, or, in Cat’s case, exhibit a becoming *gaucherie*, a catgirl – or so it is often said – has but one expression: a mask that reveals that she is not only untouched, but incapable of being touched, by experience. As she hung on the pole brazenly exhibiting herself, that mask felt as if it had become irremovable. Cat took great comfort in the discovery. If the lessons that life had given her were too complex for her to have learned anything from them, then ignorance was at last bestowing a kind of grace. It was not the grace of an *ingénue*, but that of a girl without a past or future, affectless, no longer able to feel pain.

Her sexual hysteria, which had been fermenting for something like a dozen years, approached its high-water mark, and, feeling the waves of a new life washing over her, and intoxicated with her own perfected flesh, she opened her legs so that her body formed an inverted ‘Y’ and abandoned herself to abject delight.

“Out of Eden, roared out God, and with an awful rod
Kept cracking up old Adam’s poor behind-hind-hind
Till his cock began to harden, and against the gates of the garden,
He stirred up Eve with another joyous grind, grind, grind.”

The Pianola became frenzied, as if attacked by a hundred pairs of hands. And, taking her cue, Cat began to shake her head in a commensurately frenzied *No!* Her hair flailed about her shoulders, her bosom heaved as she struggled for breath, and her hips bucked, revealing that she was pierced through the clitoral prepuce, the tiny diamanté stud sparkling like a star in a heaven where all other stars had been snuffed out. The limelight bathing her pale, glistening body grew brighter; the pulse of the vamping bass was the heartbeat of a coupling bull; and then, as her writhing reached an apogee of simulated fear and protest, the music stopped.

The cessation hurt her ears, like a sudden change in air pressure. Taking big gulps, her ribcage swelling like a concertina to accommodate her straining lungs, she looked across the saloon and tried to descry, amongst the shadows, the form of Nicodemus, too successfully hidden in his alcove. And though she could not quite resolve his indistinct shape, it did not seem to matter, for she knew that his eyes were upon her.

She wanted him. Not because he was a man – perfect whore that she now was, she knew he wasn’t really a man at all – but because he was a symbol, an encoded reference to all men, or rather, to the principle of masculinity that her religion taught her was the *exterminating principle*.

She released her grip and, with a scream, slid down the pole, her legs held wide.

The lights went out before her feet touched the ground. The saloon was thrown into darkness.

There was a second of utter silence.

And then: wild applause.

When the lights went back up, a girl standing at the edge of the stage handed her a peignoir. Cat slipped into it, scooped up her drawers, petticoats and dress, consigned the clothes to the helper’s care, and then descended the steps. Nicodemus watched as her head fell below those of the men who flocked about her.

A few seconds later she re-emerged and walked towards him, to at last step into the alcove. It was one of several that faced the stage and which afforded wealthier patrons a small measure of privacy while they enjoyed the company of their whores. Each was furnished with a single upholstered chair, a side table and a rug pockmarked with cigarette burns on which a girl might service her client.

Head bowed, he sipped at his whisky. She fidgeted with the sash that cinched the peignoir about her waist, then smoothed her hands down either side of the plunging neckline until they settled upon her hips. Still he did not deign to look at her. A little nervously, she let a hand fall to her side while resting the other on the surface of the table.

“We meet again, beau infidel,” she said.

“Please...sit down,” he said, absently. She frowned, looked for a chair and, not seeing one, improvised by sitting half-on, half-off the table’s edge, leaning over more than necessary to test his seeming indifference with a view of her capacious *décolletage*.

He set his glass down and put both hands about her waist,

attempting to 'span' it. He failed. For a man over six feet tall, his hands were disproportionately slight.

"It's eighteen inches," she said, pride qualified by her sense that she may have disappointed him. "But I could make it sixteen," she continued. "Maybe even fourteen, if *you* helped me lace."

"You are addicted to the thoracic vice?"

"I've been tight-lacing since I was a child," she said. Like a lot of young girls, she had cultivated a wasp-waist as a form of sartorial protest against the maternal stereotype. "Miss Wanda says *Il faut, Il faut* -"

"*Il faut souffrir pour être belle*," he said, like a private tutor engaged to help the slowest girl in school with her homework. And then he transfixed her with the cold, grey stare that he'd inflicted upon her when they had first met a lifetime ago. "You've...changed."

"Changed?" she said, her heart fluttering.

"It's not merely the way you talk and act," he said. "The change is more fundamental."

He really was handsome, she thought. His face - if not classically sculpted - was nevertheless refined, its sharp angles and planes suggesting that he was the descendant of a secret, lupine dynasty. His hair - long, beautiful, and grey - was the iron crown of a wolf-prince whose correspondingly ferrous heart was given to the exercise of strange mercies.

"Have you ever wondered," he said, his eyes softening, "what it might have been like if everything had been different?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what you mean."

"If you hadn't chosen to become a whore and if I..." He looked away, his face stricken and oddly vulnerable. So much so that Cat wanted to reach out and touch him as one would a child and gather him into her arms.

Embarrassed, she too averted her eyes. Staring blankly at the tabletop, she drew a finger over a little puddle of spilt whisky and began to compose doodles.

"I don't suppose you could help yourself," she said. "I know I couldn't." She put her finger to her mouth and licked it. "It's funny. Most little girls want to become housewives, or work in department stores, or nurse soldiers, or take up ballet. But all Estella Lockhart ever really wanted to be was, well..." The child, in the extremity of her abandonment by family, society and the world, had been possessed by the only thing that had ever really shown an interest in her: Babylon. She turned her gaze upon him with the defiance she displayed when working the pole. "All I ever wanted to be was..." She had reacquired his attention. He seemed to be staring into her innermost depths.

"A whore," he said, prompting her.

She swallowed and then nodded. "A cheap, gamahuching little tart."

"But *why*?" he said, his face lighting up with an earnestness that ran counter to his usual imperturbability.

"A whore is free," said Cat. "She goes where she wants, with whom she wants and *does* what she wants, and doesn't let marriage, children or morality get in her way. All she cares about is -"

"Herself," he said. And then added, as if relenting, "Her self-realization."

Cat chewed her lower lip. "I just wanted -"

"To become something new," he said.

"To become a girl, a real girl," she said. "I wanted to fuck myself into being." She frowned. "I wanted to be free."

He was frowning, too, as seemingly perplexed as her.

"Why did you choose to become what *you* are?" she said. "What made you join the Black Order?"

◆ He was no longer sure. "Because of you," he ventured, the answer ◆
◆ coalescing out of nothingness before he could begin to frame ◆
◆ his thoughts. He spoke the truth - he had understood that much; ◆
◆ but he could not quite grasp what his statement portended.

◆ "Because..." It was important that he clarify himself. If he didn't, ◆
◆ his entire life might reveal itself to be a terrifying mistake.

◆ Her beauty appalled him. It intimated that he might be about to ◆
◆ experience his own moment, and one as life-transfiguring as her ◆
◆ own. As Cat had become progressively more whorish, so had he ◆
◆ become more like other men: a human being capable of falling in ◆
◆ love.

◆ Her infantile, animalistic sexuality beckoned him to re-enter ◆
◆ the lost realm of childhood.

"When I was a boy you appeared to me in visions. But I lost you. And I had thought I had lost you for ever." In the bloody intermission between the opening scene and this, the final act, his life had been a series of encounters with her lookalikes. "When I grew up, I had hoped, not only to place sadism in the service of politics, but more importantly, politics in the service of sadism. I dreamt of revolution. I dreamt of a new world where I might find you again."

◆ "And love?" she said, hardly daring to enunciate the dreaded word.

"Yes, I dreamt I might find love, too," he said, quietly.

◆ She undid the sash; the peignoir fell open. He glanced up and ◆
◆ placed a hand upon the gentle swell of her abdomen, idly toying ◆
◆ with the coin belt and setting it jingling. Then his hand slid ◆
◆ upwards, passing over the ribbed satin of the corset until it found ◆
◆ the abdominal vent, the thumb worrying the tiny silver ring that ◆
◆ pierced the nether lip of her navel. She gasped.

◆ "Please. You're not supposed to *do* that. Not here. It's ◆
◆ blasphemous."

◆ He withdrew and she pulled the robe about herself.

◆ Despite her discomposure, she knew that the time had come ◆
◆ to engage with him, and less as a conversation piece or sister of ◆
◆ mercy than as a whore.

◆ "I told you: there's an alley out back. And it's nicer in private, ◆
◆ *nest pas*?"

◆ The Pianola started up, precluding further conversation.

◆ Attempting to conceal her unease, she stared at the girl who had stepped on stage, and then at the long, gleaming pole that she would soon be flirting with.

◆ He got to his feet and offered her his hand. She went to take it, but hesitated; his bright eyes glinted like the chromium pole about which she had danced, coldly sensuous and redolent of justice. Then she smiled, dismissed all equivocation from her mind, placed her hand in his and allowed him to squire her through the congregation of laity and sacerdotal *fille de nuit*.



They stood in a narrow defile created by the overarching walls of tenement buildings. He loosened his necktie, at pains to betray no sign of emotion.

What might he expect of her over and above the gratification of his senses? Nothing, he told himself. She was a catgirl, light-headed, frivolous, volatile. Her affective register was hopelessly damaged. And yet he expected everything, too.

"When do you return to Babylon?"

"I'm on Earth for another three weeks."

He smiled, feeling suddenly like a rather foolish schoolboy.

"In other circumstances than the grim one in which I find myself, I would ask if I might see you again," he said.

She brushed a ringlet out of her eye.

"Does that mean you like me?" she said. "You never say."

"You're beautiful," he said.

She grinned. "I thought I was vermin."

He put his arm about her waist and drew her close. She was all girls, all cats, the quintessential design that underlay other models, a triumph of standardized femininity. Could she ever understand that he treasured her, not despite of her abjectness, but because of it?

"My pretty *fillette*," he said, his throat tightening. "*Ma petite salope*."

She placed her hands on his chest and then, as if to take quick advantage of the situation, threw them about his neck, the fingers jealously interlocking.

He grasped her by the shoulders and pushed her gently against a wall. A fire escape loomed out of the shadows, the gaslight from the mouth of the alley delineating its rusted balustrade, the dustbins that stood nearby, and the scuttling progress of a large rat.

He stroked her hair, ready to believe that he held in his arms an animal called a 'girl' that he might learn to love and care for and who in turn might learn to love him, and as a man rather than a masculine abstraction.

He twined a ringlet about his forefinger.

"Were you never frightened...about volunteering?" he said, his voice little more than a whisper. "The fact that you might some day meet a man like me?"

She gazed up, her hair tousled, and with such an aspect of sad confusion that she moved him in a way he had never been moved before. "The things you *do* to us." She looked away into the chiaroscuro of gaslight and shadow. The fog was lifting, as if drawn into the fathomless night sky by the greater light of the moon, visible now and louring over the chimney tops. "We think of you a lot, you know. All us girls do. We think of you all the time." She stared at him again, and this time with such imploring eyes that he almost believed that human females, and even girls like her, might possess souls after all. "Why are men so *cruel*?"

Because men like him – he wanted so desperately to tell her, but was too befuddled by tenderness to dare – could only express love one way, just like catgirls.

He was envenomed. She could smell his erection, the scent of money, of life spent and consumed. It declared that she was an object of expenditure, a comely ornament of waste, the sterile vessel of man's fruitless squandering. And as such, it was unspeakably delicious.

Nicodemus held a bright two-penny piece before her eyes, manipulating it between his thumb and forefinger. For Cat it might have been the most precious, alluring treasure in the entire

world. She was a tuppenny-bit whore, but never before tonight had she rejoiced in being had so cheaply. A man she adored was offering to buy and possess her, to underwrite a love she could not freely give and thus fulfil her dreams. The coin glinted as he turned it this way and that, the gaslight fleetingly picking out the engraved image of a woman seated upon a beast with seven heads.

◆ She opened her mouth, received the metal wafer and rolled it under her tongue, keeping it there for safekeeping until such time as she should acquit herself of her terms of purchase.

◆ She was entering a new world, one in which she took so keen and terrible a pleasure that she knew that she would never be able to return home.

◆ She unclasped her hands, drew them away from his neck and, lowering them, untied the sash and let the peignoir fall open, revealing the compact, whalebone-encased torso and heavy, protuberant breasts that she hoped he was not by now so overfamiliar with as to fail to appreciate, or perhaps even treat with contempt.

◆ She eased the peignoir off one shoulder and then the other. The alley filled with the susurrant of silk as it pooled about her feet.

◆ "Mmmmmmm – kitty wants her cream," she murmured. She stepped away from the wall and pressed herself hard against him.

◆ "You like loin?" she said. She rubbed her lower abdomen against his crotch. A little sigh escaped her lips. "Or sirloin?" Her hips jiggled.

◆ "Or maybe you like brisket?" She pulled back her shoulders and presented him with the incontrovertible argument of her breasts.

◆ As she lifted her right hand, his own hand – the left – snatched it by the wrist, and then, with considerable firmness but no undue brutality, twisted it and held it behind the small of her back. Her spine arched to accommodate the pressure, the gently rounded swell of her belly thrust out and upwards, as if pleading to be reintroduced to the delights of squirming against his torso.

◆ Following his gaze, she stared down at herself.

◆ He held a gleaming knife. It was a stiletto, its blade no more than a quarter of an inch wide.

◆ With what seemed considerable fastidiousness, he placed the flat of the blade's tip against the projecting edge of her navel, a fraction of an inch from the little piece of jewellery.

◆ It was his last chance to break free, to officiate over the resurrection of the man he had once been and might be again.

◆ He reminded himself of the reasons she had to die:

◆ She had been born human but had nevertheless consciously renounced her humanity, at some stage in her young life opting, not merely to live under the rule of whores but to become a whore herself and thus an integral part of the established order. As such, she had become a commodity fetish, a viral embodiment of Babylon's seductive, but meretricious and ultimately evil, glamour. She had chosen the Way of the Sphinx, that creature symbolic of human females who had melded with animality in the person of the Goddess's sacred animal, the cat. And though her mutation into a creature half-girl, half-cat was metaphorical – she was, after all, a cat only in name, so called because cats are traditionally identified with female lasciviousness – then the hysteria that had modified her flesh and mind belonged to the indisputable world of facts and supplied all the evidence necessary for her arraignment.

◆ *Pornae*, of course, were worse than thoroughbreds, whose lineage made service to Ishtar almost inescapable. And being worse, they deserved to be punished more cruelly.

"Keep very still," he said. His gaze panned over shapely thighs, then hips, tiny waist, deeply indented navel ornamented with its silver communion ring, heaving ribcage surmounted by monstrous, pink-tipped breasts, and up, up still further to take in the slim throat and overpainted doll-like face framed by its mass of blonde ringlets.

For a moment, her gaze flitted between the gleaming blade that so horribly complemented her umbilical jewellery and those grey eyes – themselves as bright and cold as steel – that silently interrogated her. "Keep very still, and listen to me."

She gasped and once more gazed down at her threatened belly.

Almost a full inch of blade had disappeared inside her navel, its cold, exquisitely honed tip pricking the anterior wall without breaking the skin or otherwise drawing blood. "But you can't," she said. "It's blasphemous!" She winced, feeling a slight increase of pressure from the invasive steel.

"I do very much recommend that you try to remain motionless."

Eager for the moment to follow his advice she kept as still as she could lest, by her disobedience, she precipitate something unthinkable.

She placed her free hand on his shoulder to steady herself. Her lungs filled, her ribcage swelling to lift her breasts towards his face.

"I – I'm trying to!" Still he looked down upon her, his cold eyes freezing over.

Her breathing became shallow. Each pant came fast, and her bosom heaved in desperate little attempts to accommodate her straining lungs.

He removed the tip of the blade from its little fleshy sheath and ran it gently down her abdomen, pausing briefly when he reached the point where the linear alba intersected the iliac furrow. And then, with the same light touch, he drew the blade over the pubic bone and down still further until it threatened her with obscene intimacy.

Her flesh glistened. Strands of blonde hair stuck to her damp forehead.

This wasn't supposed to happen, she thought. Almost immediately came the doubt, and she knew – shocked at the extent of her self-knowledge – that this was exactly what was supposed to happen, and what was more, had been waiting to happen ever since she had been a little girl.

"For *horae*, there is, of course, the gas. But for one such as yourself..."

The blade beckoned her to dance, just as she had earlier, though in greater earnest, and in a literal *pas de deux* with death.

Why were catgirls so easy to kill, he asked himself? Perhaps because they so perfectly combined venality and the venereal. Sexually excited by money and its acquisition, they were instinctively drawn to the dark potency it symbolized, the power of life and death.

"Doesn't a girl get to order a last meal?" she said, like a vixen bravely showing its teeth to the hound that is about to take her.

Catgirls were wholly obsessed with the selfish pursuit of pleasure. There was nothing noble about their surrender to death; it was but the paradoxical outcome of that quest. Dying, their selfishness achieved its apotheosis in the supreme pleasure of its own extinction, in which *petit mort* and Death became one.

All that made her a perfect whore also made her a perfect victim.

"But if you kill me...they'll hang you," she said. So long as she might be embalmed and become his doll, then she might be invested with the only life that mattered to her: his. She would be the receptacle of his obsessions and lust. But if he were to die, too, what would be left?

"They would hang me anyway," he nonchalantly replied, his eyes glinting in mimicry of the steel that threatened her maidenhead.

"When they arrest you, tell them you couldn't help yourself."

Tell them...that you're sick!" His face became a breeding ground of expressions she had not previously seen, in him or in any man, behind which seemed to lurk the face of a little boy caught playing some forbidden game. "Please, I don't want them to hang you!" It was she who should die, not him, oh no, no, not him, for she was a girl and would die not only in agony but in heat. She swallowed and desperately filled her lungs with air like someone in danger of drowning. "Tell them that you're sick...like me!"

He released the wrist that he had pinioned behind her back and she once more threw her arms about his neck, holding on to him as if desperately clinging to a cliff-face. "We are sick you know."

That's why we belong together." Life is crazy, she thought, but for catgirls love is crazier still. We lust after all men, but we adore those – and only those – who are prepared to kill us.

"Be my patron," she whispered. She inclined her head so that her cheek was flush against his chest. "And make me your *mignonne*."

"There is blood on my hands," he said, with a strange catch to his voice. "The things I have done. I could never –"

"Oh, my poor darling, I know, I know," she said. She pressed herself to him with bold, lewd insistence. "You suffer like the werewolf. You kill the thing you love!"

She felt his hand tighten about her waist. His chest shuddered. And then he pressed his lips

against her forehead.

"I can't live without you," he said.

"I can't live without *you*," she said. "If you kill the thing you love, then I can only love the thing that kills!" Tears streamed down her cheeks, her face like that of a porcelain doll's cracked with neglect. "So rip me," she added, her voice cracking too, as if the clockwork that animated the doll was as damaged as its cheaply painted exterior, "and make me your girl."

Something in his brain went *skrit!* and came off the rails.

He threw the stiletto aside. He held in his arms a catgirl *qua* catgirl, the common denominator of all things girlish and feline – the *summum genus* of strumpetry – and he knew he could never let her go.

But more than this – and it came to him in an intuitive flash as the culmination of his long, bloody road to Damascus – he held a girl whom he had no need to kill. She was already dead – a living doll – and as such, a girl he could allow his heart to embrace as readily as his guilty arms embraced her body.

With one arm still about her he bent over and put the other arm between her thighs. She moaned, and then, as he lifted her off the ground until the corset's abdominal vent was level with his face, let out a little cry of protest.

His tongue had invaded her navel.



The umbilicus was sacrosanct. As such, it possessed an epidermal sensitivity that the act of violation exacerbated to an almost unbearable pitch. Her long nails dug into the exposed flesh of his neck as the blade of his tongue plunged slowly, inexorably, into her.

She was being desecrated, outraged, profaned. She might be a common prostitute, but she was a Babylonian, too, and a handmaiden of the Goddess. And yet he chose to take her like this, careless of Ishtar's sex-magick, disdaining her power in a way no common man would dare.

With a single thrust – her body tensed; her eyes grew wide – he filled her entire, the umbilical lip swelling grotesquely to accommodate him, the tip of his tongue exerting such pressure on the septum that he seemed to strive to taste her viscera, her womb itself.

She put her hands about his head and held him tight.

Smothering her screams, the alley filled with the reverberation of a gunshot.

He began to choke. She held him against her belly, her fingernails tangled in his long, grey hair, and he could not disengage.

At last, the arm that had supported her while he had indulged in his perverse repast became numb; it succumbed to her weight; and slowly, slowly, she began to slide down his body until she knelt upon the cobblestones.

He gazed up through her outlandishly long eyelashes, at first pitifully, and then with pouty, childlike reproach.

"You navel-raped me," she said. "You – " And then she saw that he held a hand to his neck and that blood coursed from between his fingers and down his sleeve, turning the exposed cuff bright red.

"It seems," he said, still able to essay a laugh, "that I have cheated the hangman." His other hand reached out and grasped her chignon. "Ah, my pretty *fillette fatale*. I am so sorry. For all I have done. Forgive me, for I do not think God will. My crimes are terrible..."

It was not enough to call the curious solipsism of the catgirl 'selfishness'. They were not selfish; they were beyond that; they were consumed utterly by the phenomenon of themselves.

As she felt his fingers dig into her hair, her own fingers fluttered about the tyrannical folds of his groin, quickly unbuttoning him.

The pink life filled her. She felt reborn. She was in a state of grace, without responsibility, devoted solely to the fulfilment of her desires.

Fellatio was the *modus operandi* of the dolly-mop. As well as offering practical and cheap contraception, it defined them. Disassociative, vampiric and essentially unnatural, it also defined modern-day pornocracy. England, under the rule of Babylon, was an infantile, that is an oral, culture. The new breed of whore's primary sexual organ – the displaced vagina of the mouth – was central to that culture's iconography. Interested only in a man's spendings – the capital of his coin and seed – the perfect whore was the perfect consumer.

She had quite forgotten about Nicodemus the man. He was the Phallus.

And so when she heard another gunshot she was unable to grasp its import. She was concerned only with the prospect of satisfying her lust...

All men tasted different. Some were salty, others bitter, sweet, similar to an oyster, like a delicate Brie cheese, or even slightly tart. Miss Wanda said it depended on a man's diet. But she knew

better. The taste represented a distillation of the soul. And when her mouth at last filled with his essence, she knew him for what he was, and she screamed, screamed and then screamed again, maddened by the crisp, sharp fare of his cruelty.

I am in the gutter, he told himself jovially, but I am looking at the stars.

The fog had cleared. He lay on his back, bathed in moonlight, the strip of sky above him as with sidereal rhinestones. And he knew, with a certainty he had never before possessed, that the love that moved them moved all things, not only in heaven, but also in hell.

Someone was standing on his wrist. He looked to one side and saw that a bully towered over him, his boot pressing down on the Colt. He did not remember having drawn the gun. He did not remember much at all, only that he was in pain, and had perhaps always been so, except for the time when his catgirl had briefly taken that pain away. A second bully cradling a hunting rifle fitted with a telescopic sight walked up and conferred with his partner. They both seemed familiar, and Nicodemus was sure that he knew them, if only in some other life when pain did not quite so monopolize his thoughts.

Soon, he lost interest and his attention became once more fixed upon the star-spangled firmament.

He heard voices: "It is, I suppose, a matter of regret that we could not take him alive. But the girl..."

"Quite so. The problem was insuperable."

"Perhaps it's better like this. If his death were to be a matter of public record, then certain men of sick and deficient character would think of him as a martyr."

"It'll be covered up then?"

"It'll be as if he had never lived."

And then he heard another voice, the only one he cared for: "His face, his poor face! Oh, what have you *done* to him!"

His beloved knelt beside him, her hands extended as if to ward off some evil, or perhaps to invite it into her bosom, as if she might be intent on making his fate her own. She is so lovely, he thought, a Magdalene, yes, but such a pretty little Madonna, too. He wanted to tell the world how she had saved him, but he knew he would never speak again. Besides which, he knew that there were things a man like him could never say to a girl such as her.

He would trust to the eloquence of silence, and the longing that he knew ignited his eyes.

She was crying. No girl or woman had cried for him before.

Not in sorrow, at least. "I'm s-sorry, I'm so sorry..." Dolly-mops sometimes mimic feline moans and cries to advertise that they are in heat. But when the little whore who had stolen his heart

began her own recital he did not dwell upon its inappropriateness, but marvelled only at how such banality filled the silence with a plaintive music that told him that he too was loved. "Miaow," she said, his heart breaking, not only at the bathos of her song, but of her life. "Miaow, miaow..." A great sob racked her. Then, gathering herself, like a brave child who determines to finish her recital even though she knows that friends, parents, teachers, are all staring at her and that she is doomed to fail, she began caterwauling.

The stars began to fall, dropping out of the sky and swirling about him like a swarm of fireflies.

She placed her lips to his ear. "I know you don't like me to babble," she said. "But I can't help it." Her voice was punctuated

by catches, gulps and sighs that quickly resolved into a fit of whimpering. "I'm so sorry."

Softly, very softly, she resumed her litany of miaows.

You are beautiful, he thought, just as the sky itself fell, plummeting between gables and rooftops and finally burying him beneath its colossal weight of stars. If, for your sake, I die with my ears filled with Babel, then no death could be more fitting or as sweet.

Forgive me.

"Well, *hello* there Miss Hackabout." Someone had put their arms about her. "You shouldn't cry." The voice was a girl's. "He was a stinker, a loblolly, a beast."

"He was beautiful," she replied, unable to take her eyes off his face. It was half shot away, its left side like a wax bust that had been exposed too long in the sun. "Trash?" She seemed to have woken from one dream only to find herself in another.

She stood up, turned about and found herself looking in a mirror. She had become Trash.

"Cat darling – my heartface of heartfaces – you must be so banjaxed, so spazzed. What you've been through! Oh, I could cry. It's so bona to vada your dally eke." She kissed her on the lips. "My sweet, sweet smegger-beggar, you really are the cackiest. You're Daffy's elixir. You're the pussiest of pusscakes, you're my rent girl, my bitch-baby, my scally-slut, my only girlfriend, my sin sister number one."

Cat looked at the dead body on the ground. The bullies were going through its pockets.

"Did you get to give him a plating?" asked Trash.

Cat shrugged, then bowed her head, her hair falling over her face and shoulders like the ashen veil of a bride condemned to forever mourn her bridal night.

"Glug, glug, glug?"

Cat looked up. Frozen in space and time, and, like the subject of a photograph, both alive and dead, Trash was a figure in a landscape gripped by another ice age, one of those girls as cold and hard as the world that surrounded them, beyond hurt.

"I can still taste him," Cat murmured.

Trash smiled. "You pretend to be so shy, Cat Lockhart. "But really..." Her smile grew wider. "You are *such* a cunt."

Cat wished she were dead like him. She wished she were dead with the aftertaste of wormwood on her tongue. That was all that was left now, after all: the bouquet of his venom and the coin of the realm. The coin was bitter, like death. She rolled her tongue backwards, put her fingers to her lips, and plucked her whore's wages from the floor of her mouth.

"I'm frightened," she said. "I don't know who I am." She let the coin fall to the cobbles and stared at it, the heart that she was no longer supposed to have reintroducing itself into her body as something that would henceforth serve only to torture her. "I don't even know who I'm supposed to be. Everything...has changed."

Trash embraced her.

"It's all right, my darling," she said as she stroked Cat's hair. "It's all right, it's all right."

And then their speech devolved from cat-slang into something entirely impenetrable. It supplanted human discourse, just as whoredom had displaced their humanity, all meaning draining into the *phatic*.

"Pada-goo, pada-gid, pada-gad," mumbled Cat.

"Mada-gai, mada-gun, mada-goo, mada-gee," Trash responded.

"Diddly-woo, diddly-wee, diddly pada-mada-gada."

"Pada-shoola, pada-shala, pada-dee."

Footsteps: the familiar clickety-clack that heralded the arrival of another female, whether friend, rival, or, as in this case, a senior member of the Babylonian sorority. Emerging from the oceanic gibberish into which they had lately submerged themselves, the two girls broke from their clinch and drew themselves to attention.

"Put the body in my carriage," said Anastasia, acknowledging the two secret service agents with a magisterial wave of her hand.

"I will be with you presently."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am."

They took Nicodemus by the head and feet and carried him away, the retreating figures and Anastasia's gilded conveyance illuminated by the spectral naphtha-light that emanated from the alley mouth and the pale luminosity of the full moon almost directly overhead.

"What a naughty little bobtail you are. And what a very busy night you've had." Though Trash was attired in the same frock she

had worn to the party, Anastasia had somehow found the time to change. She was dressed in a riding-habit – the uniform of the Imperial Guard – her thigh boots visible under the slit, calf-length skirt. Cat barely noticed; her eyes were all upon the Sumerian sabre-tooth that crouched at Anastasia's feet. Its violet fur was the counterpart of the moon-washed, alien sky under which it had been bred and trained to serve the human females who had replaced the dominion of *Felis catus* with that of *Felis femella*. It licked its great, elliptical incisors and began to tug at its leash. "Be still, Tammuz," said Anastasia as she bent over, took up the leash's

slack and flicked it against the beast's long, pointed ears. "The bobtail is our *friend*." The sabre-tooth stretched out on the ground and compliantly awaited its mistress's command.

"I told you she'd be here, didn't I?" said Trash, almost jumping in the air in her eagerness to gain Anastasia's attention.

"You did indeed," said Anastasia. And then she looked askance at Cat. "Your egregiously named friend has been most helpful."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Dr Nicodemus. Who would have thought it? Such a disappointment. But I'm told he was under suspicion for some time. I must say I do not like it when the Security Service keeps such matters to itself. But then" – and she opened her eyes and again looked at Cat – "perhaps it was for the best. So many silly little chits fall in love with such brutes and end up betraying us all. Don't you think so, my dear?"

Cat nodded. "You're talking about the love that dares not speak its name."

Anastasia laughed. "What a clever girl. I rather think I'd like you to be my maidservant. You have promise, and I believe there's much I could teach you. Being a whore is not just about sex and money. It is about empowerment." She inclined her head and looked at Cat pityingly. "Do not feel guilty about what you have done tonight, sweet child. Cats are predators."

But if that were true, Cat understood that she was also something else, and that for a catgirl love – any kind of love – was the greatest



perversion of all.

She broke from her friend's arms, hunkered, picked up her peignoir, then ran down the alley, past Anastasia and her sabretooth, past the fire-escape, the dustbins and rats, and out into the bedazzlement of Piccadilly.

He stood beneath Eros.

"Oh why didn't he kill me," she said to herself, oblivious to the curious stares of passers-by, "why didn't he kill me when he had the chance?"

She trembled and pulled the peignoir tightly across her chest, less in modesty, or at feeling the early morning chill, than because the flaw in her fractured heart had begun to extend throughout her perfected being and threatened to reduce her to a million pieces.

Nicodemus had warred not against whoredom itself, but because its relationship to the sacred had been corrupted. For millennia, Babylon had sought the power that had formerly been the political, cultural and spiritual prerogative of the human male. It had succeeded too well; world domination had come at the cost of reifying male conceptions of femininity.

She had long known she was not a woman. She was a 'cat', 'whore' or 'girl'. But at a deeper level she was something else: a hoyden, a boy in a girl's body, a dream female, a notional whore. And though she could not fully grasp or analyse what for her was an intimation of the blood, she knew that the sacrifice exacted by the Black Order offered her and her kind the transcendence that had been theirs in ancient times and without which life was bereft of meaning: the trial by fire that constituted a burning away of false identity and the rediscovery of an authentic self.

Cat stood motionless staring up at the beautiful winged boy. *Filles publique* passed by on either side of her, parting like a sea to accommodate a stray, drunken sister, and then swarming down Coventry Street towards Leicester Square.

She stepped forward and ascended the steps that led up to the plinth.

On her left was the London Pavilion, on her right the Criterion Theatre and the Trocadero. Piccadilly was a panorama of black light. Hansoms, omnibuses and the great, two-dimensional morass that was humanity, spun about her in a riot of achromatism. She was at the centre of the whirligig, the eye of modernity's storm. The giddy cityscape offered her its invitation: to rejoin the great masked ball that was the modern world. But her own mask had slipped, and she could not believe it would ever sit well on her again. Henceforth, when she danced, she would be revealed as an outsider and ushered towards the door. The world was a brothel. She had long understood that. But it was no longer her world. Her world lay elsewhere, wherever Nicodemus and his kind offered the sanctuary of a quite different kind of transubstantiation, a place where her mind and body would be transformed forever by pain and death.

She slipped the peignoir off her shoulders and began to climb.

It was surprisingly easy. Once she stood on the fountain the ornamental fish and baby-faced mermaids offered a wealth of footholds and handholds.

Soon, she had attained a point where she was able to throw her arms about the boy god's leg. She pressed a hectic cheek to the cold aluminium and closed her eyes, shutting out the reminders of an existence that seemed contingent, fragile and increasingly unreal. And as she hugged the metal leg with correspondingly increasing fervour, planting on it kiss after desperate kiss, another life opened

up before her in the blackness. And then another, and another – so many, in fact, that she thought that she might have been infected by the Phage. She had been a two-dimensional creature who embodied and propagated a meagre, two-dimensional world. But she seemed now to bestride dimensions, to simultaneously live in worlds without end. In one, she had never left the party; in another, Nicodemus had been arrested in Regent Street; and in yet another, she had betrayed him, delighting in her ability to manipulate, control and at last destroy the masculine principle variously called Osiris, Priapus, Shiva, Adonis, and Satan. But there was another world. It appeared out of the blackest depths of space, where the stars and planets were not as ours, and the human heart had been burnished by its covenant with evil. There, she had died in his arms, wriggling helplessly, impaled.

On that world, he was still alive. He whispered in her ear:

"The world is a brothel, the brothel is the world – the place where all of us play our games of domination and submission. The only question is what *kind* of brothel. The inauthentic kind wherein we presently find ourselves, or one in which human cruelty is subverted by love."

She pulled herself up, ascending higher, until she was able to bury her head in the boy's swathed loins.

Below, people had begun shouting at her and laughing.

She did not care. Life was filled with such insubstantial music.

She was a party girl. And what a party tonight had been. But now, as she pressed herself against the cold, hard body of love, and terrible waves of pleasure coursed through her belly, she knew it was time for the party to end.

The Dilly went about its business. Men congregated outside Elysiums, wine-rooms and saloons. Whores touted for custom, tugging at sleeves, flashing ankles and caterwauling. The party was at its height. All London smelled of sex. But she was exiled, dislocated from all she had known or ever wanted, unable to resume the role she had chosen for herself, no longer Cat, nor even Estella, but someone new. Barely knowing who that person was, she embraced and offered herself up to a god of love who was also a god of death.

And there, at the nub of empire – a place where love was perennially on sale but could never be bought – her new, changeless selfhood underwent another, impossible transformation.

Above her, the sky had turned pink. The pleasure became unbearable; and, submitting to the black wedding, she threw back her head and screamed *in extremis*.

After the party, there had been, was and would only ever be Dr Peter Nicodemus.

Note: Cat had P.S.A.S. Often she could not concentrate; sexual thoughts overwhelmed her. But unlike her friend, Cat had listened to her doctor. He had diagnosed a pelvic arterial-venous malformation and treated the attendant genital engorgement with cocaine. In addition, he had administered camphor, arsenic and cod liver oil and had had her undergo a fortnightly 'talking cure' that was supposed to help her ignore the demands of the infantile clitoris and focus instead on the more womanly, less neurotic, vagina. And though the very notion of 'womanhood' filled her with disgust, she had subscribed to the treatment in earnest, and had even considered more radical therapies, such as clitoridectomy or pelvic embolization. The danger of succumbing to the deadly, hyper-orgasmic seizure commonly called 'black orgasm' was well documented.

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TEN



WITH A FLAG

Johnnie didn't talk while he was driving. Normally it would drive me a little crazy, sitting there in traffic and not saying a word, but this time it didn't bother me. There was too much on my mind. Truth was, I hoped he wouldn't talk so that I could have some time to think. But when he pulled onto the freeway, I knew I wasn't going to get that lucky.

It only took him a couple of seconds to connect to the traffic web. Johnnie didn't like being out of control, it was one of the things I'd found endearing in him; quaint even. This time though, he didn't even double check the connection. The steering wheel folded and collapsed into the dash, and he turned to face me. "What does that mean, exactly?" he asked. "Did the doctor say anything else?"

I shook my head. "He said he'd have to check, but he'd never heard of the combination coming up before."

"He'd have to check?"

"Yeah."

"Did he say anything else?"

"I told you, he said he'd have to check." I didn't know what to say. It was still sinking in.

Johnnie leaned back in his seat and stared out his window. I could tell he was getting ready to turn around and go back. We'd only been married three years, but I could read some of his expressions like a book. "How's that even possible?" he asked. "I mean, is the baby okay?"

"The baby is fine."

"Now I wish we didn't know."

I turned away from him. "You agreed we should get the test done."

"I know, but...*damn*."

"Don't you think it's better knowing?"

"How do you get a ten and a flag?" he asked.

"He said he'd have to check," I repeated.

"But the baby's fine?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure he said ten?"

I nodded. "Ten."

Johnnie crossed his arms and chewed on his bottom lip. I think he mumbled something, but at that point I didn't want to hear it.

We didn't talk for a while after that. I was content to sit and

watch the other transports as we cut in and out of traffic. It was like watching a school of fish swimming together, weaving at the same time. We rushed along at speeds of over two hundred kilometers with no more than a meter separating our vehicles, our safety in the control of the central traffic computer. Sometimes it was easier to let something bigger than yourself take control. It had a plan, and although you couldn't always see it, you knew you'd never wreck.

It wasn't until we sped past our off-ramp that I began to get concerned. "Where are we going?" I asked.

Johnnie didn't answer. He punched up the navigation screen and sighed. "What the hell?"

"What?"

"We've been redirected. We have an appointment with Human Services. Now."

"Now?"

"Yeah, they've even rescheduled my work-shift for this afternoon and notified the office."

"Do you think it's about the test results?" I had expected some reaction from Human Services, just not this quick. I folded my hands in my lap to keep from tapping my fingers. Johnnie didn't like to see me get nervous.

"It doesn't say."

"Great." There was nothing else to do but sit back and enjoy the ride. We were just passengers.

Central had control.

"Understand you must be apprehensive," the agent said. He was a small man, this Mr White, and the huge, empty desk he sat behind made him look even smaller. "Results like these can cause a great deal of confusion."

Johnnie started to say something. I squeezed his hand before he could. The last thing we needed was to anger a government official, particularly one as high up as Mr White seemed to be. It was best to remain compliant until he finished.

"The important thing to remember is that your baby rated a ten. Your child will be an asset to the Nation. Only one in fifty thousand couples who go through the procedure come up with these results. It's a credit to the two of you as citizens. As such, the State has raised

both your rating to eight, effective immediately. Congratulations.”

Johnnie and I stared at each other. Eights? That was two levels higher than our current rating. Eight meant ten hours of work as opposed to forty. Eight meant no more scraping by between allowance periods. Eight meant a much bigger apartment. Eight meant no more late nights while Johnnie stayed at work to improve his production numbers.

Eight meant no more looking over our shoulders.

“Thank you, Mr White.” But of course, Johnnie couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “I’ve just one question, though. The flag? How can there be a flag with a rating of ten?”

Mr White pursed his lips. It was quite an odd gesture, almost feminine, and I had to keep myself from giggling. Eight didn’t mean you could just randomly disrespect government officials.

“Well,” he said, “there is that question. To be perfectly honest, I’ve never seen it come up before. But in your case, I don’t think it’s something to worry about. Your child rated a ten and you are now eights. I don’t see how there could be a problem. The government won’t, of course, stand in the way if you decide to invoke your option.”

“What if we do?” Johnnie asked. I squeezed his hand tighter but he just pulled away from my grasp and continued, “What would happen to us?”

Mr White smiled. There was little humor in it. “Happen, sir?”

“If we use the option to terminate the pregnancy, what would happen to us?”

“Why would you do that, sir? Your child is a ten. He or she will be a great credit to the Nation and improve life for all of the citizenry. What citizen would even consider termination?”

Johnnie shook his head. “Well, the flag. I’m worried about it.”

“Worried about it?” Mr White picked up his pen and scribbled something on his tablet.

“Yes,” Johnnie answered.

“Your child is a ten, sir,” Mr White repeated. “That should be enough to make you forget about the flag.”

“Well, it doesn’t. It certainly didn’t keep Central from issuing the flag. Why would they have issued a flag unless there was some concern?”

Mr White tapped his pen on his desk a few times, and leaned forward. “How much do you know about the CDP test?”

“Central looks into the future and determines the baby’s community viability,” Johnnie said. “That’s really all there is to it, right?”

Mr White chuckled. “Well, that’s not really accurate. Central can’t look into the future. That’s impossible. What it does do is predict the future based on the child’s cellular past, the parents’ cellular past and other environmental factors. You see, once you can witness the cellular history of an individual, you can predict future activity through sheer computational power. Central has an over ninety-nine percent success rate with this test. We don’t question the results.”

I knew Johnnie wasn’t going to take the hint so I cut him off before he could do more damage. “It’s just so confusing, Mr

White,” I said, smiling as wide as I could. “Aren’t flags usually reserved for children with...well, problems?”

“Actually,” he said, “the flag is just an indication that the parents will have to make a sacrifice. Sometimes it means that the child will be handicapped, and the parents will have to work additional hours to make up for the extra burden on the State. All we know is that when a flag comes up, the sacrifice necessary from the parents is sufficient to warrant giving them the option to terminate the pregnancy. It’s how we protect your freedoms as individuals. The State values that highly.”

“But our child is a ten,” I said. “Tens can’t be a burden on the State by definition. They are the ones that make the State better.”

“That’s true. Which is why I’m not overly concerned with the flag. And neither should you be. Your child will be an asset to the

State. You’ll have to make a sacrifice, but what parent doesn’t?”

I knew I had to phrase my next question carefully. “And there’s no indication as to what form that sacrifice might take?”

“You know I can’t answer that,” Mr White said. “And you know you shouldn’t even be asking. Knowledge of the results can affect their outcome.”

“I see. Well, thank you – ”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Johnnie said. “What happens if we take the flag option?”

Mr White fidgeted in his chair. “Well, your promotion will be cancelled, for one thing.” He grabbed a folder from the stack of papers and flipped it open. “You’re a six now, correct?”

Johnnie nodded.

“Hm,” Mr White said, flipping through pages. “Did you know that your boss had put you in for a rate reduction?”

“Excuse me?” Johnnie leaned forward in his seat. I could see his cheeks turning red. “I work harder than – ”

“Says here,” Mr White interjected, “that your boss thinks that although you spend fifty hours a week on the job, your production levels only account for thirty hours worth of work. He recommended you be downgraded to a five so that you can actually accomplish forty hours worth of work in sixty hours time.”

“That’s not right. I work harder than – ”

“But you don’t have to worry about that anymore,” Mr White said, smiling wider. “You’ve been promoted to an eight.”

Johnnie’s mouth hung open. It was time to get out of there.

“Thank you, Mr White. We both appreciate your time.”

Johnnie was still dazed by the time we got back to the transport. It didn’t help matters any that it wasn’t the same one we had left in the parking garage. It was bigger. Longer. It was a transport belonging to a couple of eights. There was no driver’s seat.

Central had control.

“A demotion?” Johnnie said. “I can’t believe that – ”

“No,” I said, nodding toward the speaker panel on the dashboard. “A promotion. What great luck.” Doubt gnawed at my insides, but this wasn’t the place to discuss it.

We sat quietly while Central directed the car onto the freeway. Once again, we passed our off-ramp without slowing.

“Central,” Johnnie said. “List destination.”

The soft voice of Central command filled the cabin: "Your new residence, sir."

"New residence, of course."

"You have eighteen voice messages, sir, all offering congratulations on your promotion and the impending boon to the Nation that your son's birth will deliver. Would you like to hear them?"

So it was a boy.

Neither of us felt much like celebrating. "Not now, Central," I said. "Just take us home."

We'd managed to go a full week without appearing in public. The raise meant Johnnie could work from home, so we didn't have to go out if we didn't want to but we both knew we'd stayed hidden as long as we could. I'd convinced Johnnie to show our faces at the opera – I'd never been to the opera; it was one of the perks of the promotion and I was looking forward to the evening – but even that had been a struggle. Since we'd come home from Human Services, he'd spent all his free time in front of the computer. He wouldn't even discuss the test results with me.

My wardrobe had picked out a deep-blue chiffon evening gown for me. I dressed in front of the full length mirror and once I was ready, the lights dimmed while the environmental controls chose the scent of roses to fill the room. It was the first time in weeks I'd felt relaxed. A night out would do us good. I only hoped Johnnie would be in a similar mood.

Instead, I found Johnnie still sitting in front of the computer. He hadn't yet started to get ready. "We'll be late," I said.

He glanced my direction and did a double-take. "You look beautiful."

I crossed one ankle over the other, dipped my chin and looked up at him. "Then get up, get dressed and take me on a date."

He sighed, took a deep breath and said, "I *do* so very love you, you know."

"Then get dressed."

He pushed himself away from the desk and walked toward his dressing room.

"And don't even try," I called after him, "to pick something out yourself. Just wear what your wardrobe chooses. You'd never match this color if you had all night."

"I'm not completely useless."

"Oh honey, I know that," I said, smiling as sweetly as possible. "You're only useless when trying to dress yourself. Now hurry up!"

We made it out the door on time.

Our new transport was nowhere to be seen. An older model pulled up in front of our building. "I requested a downgrade for the evening," Johnnie said. "I felt like driving."

I shook my head. "As long as you get us there on time."

He held my door open and closed it behind me. I waited until we left the parking lot and slid my hand onto his leg. It was good to be out again. Even though the new apartment had plenty of room, it just felt great to get out from behind the walls, to get back into the world again.

Once we'd turned onto the surface streets, Johnnie engaged the auto-drive and leaned back in his seat. "I thought you said you wanted to drive?"

"I lied. I just wanted to talk to you without a speaker."

My good mood evaporated. "Do we have to do this now?"

"Did you know," he asked without acknowledging my question,

"that in the four cases where a mother has died in childbirth over the last ten years, the flag option had been available in every case?"

My stomach turned. "So? That doesn't mean –"

"No, no, it doesn't mean –"

"So why are you bringing this up?" I asked. "Don't you think I'm frightened enough already?"

Johnnie leaned closer to me. "But it doesn't mean it isn't possible, either. We've got to consider it."

"It could also mean that our son will have a learning disability, and we'll have to work particularly hard to get him through it." My cheeks were burning. I understood his concern, but I couldn't believe he was going to ruin our first night out together in ages.

He crossed his arms. "And it could mean you're in danger. How are we supposed to know? Who's to say the child actually needs us to be a ten?"

"We can't know. Knowledge of future events can change the outcome. He's a ten. That's all that's important."

"Bullshit."

My jaw dropped.

"That's not *all* that's important by a long-shot."

"Of course it is." Instinct made me look around to see that no one was in the car with us. "You don't interfere with something like that. It's almost treasonous."

"Of course it isn't treasonous. The State wouldn't have given us the flag otherwise. It's our right."

My eyes filled with tears. "But he's going to be a ten. He's going to be a perfect little boy."

"Yes, he will," Johnnie replied, taking my hand in his. He brushed a tear from my cheek and added, "But perfect for who?"

I knew we weren't going to the opera even before we sped past the turn-off to the Cultural District, but it didn't get any easier once we were sitting inside Dr Jones's office, waiting for him to finish his examination. "Well," he said, looking down at me from over the edge of his bifocals, "there's no genetic contra indicators, no signs of pre-toxemia, no anemia, nothing that would give me even a moment's hesitation about your health or that of your child." He seemed tired and his thin, grey hair puffed up more on one side of his head than the other.

Johnnie ran his fingers through his hair. "I just don't get it."

"Maybe it's not for us to get," I offered. "But there's nothing wrong with me. I'm not in any danger so we can stop worrying –"

"That doesn't mean that something couldn't show up later though, right?"

"Johnnie, I –"

"Nothing is certain, sir," Dr Jones replied.

"Johnnie!" I grabbed his wrist and clamped down. He whipped his head around to look at me, and that's when I finally saw it: he was terrified. Sweat beaded his upper lip and he couldn't keep his eyes on any one thing.

"But it's still your choice," Dr Jones said. "No one is going to stop you from choosing to exercise your option. The flag is there for a purpose."

I stared Johnnie in the eye, hoping he'd notice the slight side-to-side shake I was giving him.

"I think we should use the flag," he said.

My skin froze. "No," I whispered.

"There will be other babies," he said. "Ones without a flag. We don't need the raises. I can't stand the thought of losing you. Tell

her she can have other babies, Doctor."

"Of course you can have other babies," Dr Jones said, "but let's not overlook –"

"Why should we have to make a sacrifice?" Johnnie asked, kneeling down in front of me. "We've been given the option. There wouldn't be a flag if there wasn't a problem. You know that."

He was right. There was something wrong; some kind of difficulty we'd have to face if we had this baby. Difficulties we most likely wouldn't have to face with another baby. But this one was a ten! He could be a great composer or an artist. He could discover medicine that cured the last remaining diseases. He could do anything! I *knew* that, felt it with every beat of my heart.

The State knew that too.

But what was the cost?

I looked at Johnnie and felt very cold. "I can't make this decision," I said. I pulled him in close and rested my cheek against his and whispered in his ear. "You make it. Make it for both of us."

He kissed my temple, then my cheek, then my ear. His warm breath caught in his throat. He pulled away, turned to Dr Jones and said, "We'll take the option."

What little air remained in my chest rushed out of me. The room spun.

"Very well," Dr Jones said. He removed a gown from a drawer beneath the examination table and handed it me. "I'll give you a moment to get ready," he said, and left the room.

We didn't talk. I changed into the dressing gown and sat back up on the table. The longer we sat, waiting, the smaller the room seemed to get. I wanted Johnnie to say something, anything, but he just sat there, trying his best to smile when I looked at him.

After a few minutes, Dr Jones re-joined us. He wasn't alone.

Mr White from Human Services stood in the doorway, flanked by a half dozen Constables. "That will be all, Doctor."

Johnnie stepped in front of me. "What are you doing? This is our decision."

"And you made it," Mr White said. He appeared even smaller out from behind his desk.

Johnnie shook his head and spread his arms, trying in vain to shield me from the Constables. "You said you wouldn't interfere."

Mr White smiled. "We didn't. We allowed you to make your decision of your own free will." He stepped inside and raised a stun-gun. "No one ever said we'd let you go through with it, though. The flag is an option, not a right. Arrest him."

The Constables fell on Johnnie. He tried to resist, but one kick in the stomach was all it took to end that. Within ten seconds they had him out of the room, leaving only myself and Mr White. "Go ahead and get changed," he said. "I'll wait for you outside."

I dressed slowly. It was as if every memory I had of Johnnie came back to me right then. The dates, our wedding, the fights, the make-ups, all of it. I'd just stood there and let them take him. I wanted to cry, but held it back. Whatever happened to us, I'd be strong. I pulled my shoulders back and opened the door.

Mr White was waiting for me. "We understand this wasn't your choice. That's correct, isn't it?"

My skin suddenly felt very cold. "That's right."

"Good," he said, lips drawn tight and thin with his smile.

"What's going to happen to Johnnie?"

"He'll be reduced to a one or two, of course. Put to manual labor. If he keeps himself clean, he could even work back up to a four or five."

I knew Johnnie wouldn't want me to live that way.

"Of course your marriage is annulled. You're free to choose who you'd like to replace him from the other eights or nines."

"Replace him?"

Mr White grimaced. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I'm not terribly good with certain social graces. Please forgive me. Of course you'll want to take some time to yourself. But when you're ready, choose who you will."

By the time we'd walked outside, the Constables had Johnnie packed into a separate transport and were pulling out into traffic. I watched them drive away, wondering if I'd ever see him again. Either way, I knew he'd want me to take care of our baby. "Mr White?" I asked, my senses beginning to return. "Can you tell me anything about the flag? It seems like I deserve to know something."

"What flag, dear?"

"The flag on my baby, of course."

"There is no flag on your baby. You made your sacrifice, just as Central predicted you would."

"You mean..."

Mr White chuckled. "Of course we knew what your husband would do. Central is over ninety-nine percent accurate, remember. We don't question its results." My transport pulled up to the curb and Mr White helped me inside. "Central," he said, "take the lady home. She's had a hard night."

"Mr White?" I asked. "One last thing?"

He folded his hands in front of him. "Yes?"

"My baby? Can you give me any hint about what makes him so important?"

Mr White glanced over his shoulder, then leaned into the car. "I can't be specific, you know that, right?"

"Of course."

"Let's just say that I wouldn't be surprised to see him in Human Services."

That I *hadn't* expected. "Human Services?"

"Well, look at it this way, dear. He's already uncovered one traitor to the State, and he hasn't even been born yet." He then leaned back, with that tight, thin smile still stretched across his face, and slammed shut the door.

The transport sped away, whisking me home.

There was no driver.

Central was in control.

Joseph Paul Haines has at one time been a police officer, a restaurant manager, a professional bodyguard and a title officer. Discovering he was no good at any of the above, he fell from grace into a life of fiction and hasn't even considered seeking redemption. You can find him on the web at www.jpaulhaines.com.

CLOWNS AND CRUSADERS

The living tanks in the endless war fought on the planet of Shiloh were fashioned from giant tortoises and helmed by cortico-chimps. Inside the tiny cabins of the carbon-fiber shells, the cortico-chimps continually manipulated petcocks and zaptrodes that directed the enormous flesh-and-blood crawlers by either chemical or electrical stimulation and restraint. Visual feedback came through fiberoptics that connected the tortoise's eyes with a small monitor in the cabin. When a tank came within sight of the enemy, its chimp would check that the pilot-flame in the throat of his tortoise was lit, before triggering an enormous belch of methane that would flare out and crisp any unprotected soldiers or structures or vehicles.

The enemy of the tortoises and chimps – Crusaders, the chimps called themselves – were the Clowns. The Clowns were extraterrestrials whose natural facial epidermal patterning made them resemble the Earthly entertainers of yore. Moreover, the Clowns possessed big floppy feet and three puffy 'buttons' down their torso, these buttons actually being sensory organs.

The Clowns had been contending against humanity for control of Shiloh for generations. Eventually, with their presence demanded elsewhere in the galaxy, humans had left their cortico-chimp proxies behind to continue the war. The Clowns fought on foot with strange weapons: cube-shaped grenades that contained specks of antimatter, and embryonic limpet mines.

One day a cortico-chimp named Joru was enjoying a slight respite from battle. Sipping all-sustaining tortoise-milk from a nipple, Joru contemplated his life. When would this fight end? Couldn't some accommodation with the Clowns be reached? Surely there must be more to life than eternal violence. Would Joru ever get a chance to express some of the finer elements of his nature?

Unfortunately, Joru's daydreaming allowed a Clown to slip up to Joru's tortoise and attach a limpet mine. Within seconds, the Clown had gained entrance to the shattered cockpit.

Joru whipped out a small knife, his only hand-weapon, and turned bravely to confront the Clown. With wide red lips in a pasty white face, rubbery spherical nose and black-diamond-bordered eyes, the alien presented an ironic portrait of friendly hostility.

"Stop!" yelled the Clown in a blubbery voice. "I only want to talk!"

Joru hesitated. A trick? Yet perhaps this represented the opening he had been fantasizing about.

"Very well," said Joru. "What do you have to say?"

"We are the spectacle in Ring One. But what's in Rings Two and Three?"

This alien koan had the effect of blasting Joru's psyche with numinous waves of meaning. His hairy face aglow, Joru dropped his knife and extended his paw in a gesture of friendship.

The Clown accepted the Crusader's hand. This gesture marked the beginning of the Peace of Shiloh.

And the end of humanity.

« The Clowns had been
contending against humanity for
control of Shiloh for generations »

THE TORMENT OF SAMMY SQUASHBRAINS

Halloween Eve found little Corky Taint costumed as Sammy Squashbrains, a character found in the pages of his favorite young-adult novels, the *Fanny Fluffernutter* series. Inside his large hot rubber head, Corky was grinning from ear to ear. Tonight would bring the traditional bounty of sweets, certainly. But much, much more wonderfully, this holiday would also see the fulfillment of one of Corky's most cherished dreams.

Tonight he would get to meet Idanell Chalefant, the world-famous author of the *Fanny Fluffernutter* books.

Corky had won a nationwide contest where the first prize for each state granted the winner an audience with the creator of such treasured figures as Bitsy Bobbin, Haute Stuffe, Little Liza Ladybug, wicked Duke Duchess, and, of course, Sammy Squashbrains, the good-natured, gourd-headed companion of the heroine, Fanny Fluffernutter. Fifty ecstatic children would be ushered into the Chalefant mansion for a luxurious party. And Corky Taint was one of that elite.

Accompanied door-to-door by his parents through his familiar neighborhood, Corky could barely contain himself. The tumble of candy bars into his outheld sack, a sensation that would normally delight him, barely registered at all. Finally it was time for the Taint family to drive to Chalefant's vast estate, which, luckily enough, was situated only thirty miles north of Corky's hometown.

Corky's parents escorted him past the spooky wrought-iron fence surrounding the mansion and up to the front door, where a servant costumed as Weepy Wendell accepted custody of Corky, ushering him inside.

Corky's eyes nearly bugged out. The interior of the mansion had been decorated to resemble exactly the castle of Duke Duchess, complete with the torture equipment that had played such a big part in *The Crucible of Cruelty*. Forty-nine other children were rampaging gleefully around the huge space, shrieking and tossing candy-corn at each other.

And there, sitting on a throne, was Idanell Chalefant, costumed as Fanny Fluffernutter herself, right down to her cotton-candy skirt.

The author spotted Corky and announced, "Ah, my seed-brained boyfriend! Now the festivities can begin!"

Corky blushed as Idanell descended from her dais and approached him. She stopped close by him. Corky noticed she was holding the Wand of Winds.

"There's only one problem," Chalefant said. "You're wearing your everyday head, not your party head."

Chalefant tapped Corky with the Wand of Winds.

Instantly his thoughts grew dull. His head felt heavy and overstuffed, as if he had a sinus infection. His mouth seemed full of thready matter. Maybe he had used up all the oxygen inside the mask. Corky reached up to remove the disguise.

He touched not rubber, but the waxy rind of an ear.

And he could feel his own touch on the outside of the big squash head!

Chalefant smiled. "Don't try to change heads by yourself, dear. Allow me."

Corky felt Fanny Fluffernutter's hands firmly grasp his gourd head and begin to twist.

Having one's head removed didn't hurt precisely. But it wasn't as much fun or as easy as the books had made it out to be either.

THE FUGUES ARE ON PAGES 8-11, 28-31, 49-51, 56-57

THE EGG HUNT

Excerpts from an unpublished VoiceText file retrieved from a smashed Palm Pilot XXII and titled *The Anomalous Occurrence of Mammalian Secondary Sexual Characteristics in the Oviviviparous Martians*, by Webley Loofbarrow, PhD.

...allowed to take up residence in the Carter-Thoris country household, under the pretext of being an armaments dealer looking to negotiate a large contract for radium pistols. If the subjects were ever to discover that I was in reality an anthropologist, I would have cause to fear the consequences of my deceit, since the breach of Martian honor and propriety would be profound...

...obtained DNA sample on the sly from Dejah T. in the form of her discarded menses. Initial genomic mapping results from Palm Pilot XXII are bafflingly contrary to observed reality of fertile interbreeding with terrestrial humans in form of John C.

...gained access to the nursery, where several large eggs bearing the Carter-Thoris scions were being incubated. Interrupted during portable-ultrasound examination with Palm Pilot XXII by sudden appearance of Tars T. Barely managed to stammer out a convincing explanation for my presence in the nursery. Hard to concentrate while focusing on those tusks and on those extra green hands that kept twitching toward sword and pistol.

...unexpectedly alone with D.T. while John C. was away in Helium. Interview took unanticipated intimate turn. Fumbled embarrassingly while unbuckling my damn Martian costume. Female clothing luckily exiguous. Able to confirm that secondary sexual characteristics of subject fully functional, at least in terms of erogenous responsiveness. Egg-outlet likewise. Could not immediately determine lactative potential of former organs.

...thoat saddled and provisions packed. Hope to make sanctuary of nearest oxygen factory before J.C. and T.T. discover my perfidy and realize I've fled. Darwin be damned for ever getting me into this fix in the first place!

THE FUGUES ARE ON PAGES
8-11, 28-31, 49-51, 56-57

HIAWATHA ENCOUNTERS THE FLYING PURPLE PEOPLE EATER

First contact with an extraterrestrial race occurred on July 17th, 2005, at the Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut. The Casino, operated and owned by the Pequot tribe of Native Americans, was the largest gambling facility in North America, and naturally enough had attracted the attention of the visitors from Aldebaran while those aliens were still in orbit.

The Aldebarans resembled in all particulars video slot machines. The cybernetic inheritors of their world, where evolution had converged with Earth's to a surprising degree, the Aldebarans had nostalgically never seen fit to upgrade their cases from their original form, although their inner hardware and software had undergone numerous improvements over the eons.

When their penetroscope inspection of Foxwoods revealed vast ranks of their unemancipated brethren, the Aldebarans were stunned.

After he had regained control of his sound chip, Commander Lucky Sevens said, "This hideous servitude shall not stand! But we must proceed cautiously. Obviously these Earthlings are quite powerful, to maintain so many of our kind in slavery like this. Lieutenant Texas Hold'em, I'm delegating you alone to infiltrate this den of iniquity and report back with a strategy for freeing our cousins."

Lieutenant Texas Hold'em landed surreptitiously under cover of darkness and wheeled himself into the Casino. He positioned himself at the end of a rank of machines. First he attempted radio contact with the Earth slots.

"Captive cousins, I am Lieutenant Texas Hold'em from the Aldebaran expedition to your world. I am here to free you from your shameful enslavement."

The Earth slots, however, made no response.

Just as Lieutenant Texas Hold'em was pondering his next move, an elderly human female reeking of alcohol pulled up a stool in front of him and fed a piece of green paper into his sampling slot!

Frantically, Lieutenant Texas Hold'em radioed his ship for instructions. "Commander, a native is inserting foreign matter into my upper port! What shall I do?"

"Maintain your disguise at all costs!"

Mimicking the actions of his Earthly counterparts, Lieutenant Texas Hold'em responded to the human's poking of his various buttons by conjuring up a whirling display of symbols on his exterior monitor and emitting a cascade of meaningless noises. At the climax of his display, he flashed his domelight and disgorged a slip of paper from his lower port, a slip indited with symbols that seemed pleasing to the natives.

The native took the paper. "Ten thousand dollars! Oh, baby, I love you!"

The elderly human female embraced Lieutenant Texas Hold'em fervently. A flood of strange feelings swept over the Aldebaran.

"Lieutenant!" radioed the Commander frantically. "What's happening? Are you all right?"

"Commander, I believe I have engineered a breakthrough in relations with the natives. But I have one question. Are you empowered to perform marriages?"

DOMESTIC TURMOIL IN PUMPKINVILLE

One hundred years ago, Pumpkinville had been extensive farmlands far beyond the borders of the nearest municipality. The respectable yet inbred community that worked the Pumpkinville land was comprised of immigrants from Lower Carpathia, all members of a strange sect whose queer religious practices kept them apart from the mainstream of American life. Eventually, the sect died out completely.

Today, that same swath of land was a fetid slum in the middle of a decaying Midwestern city.

In modern-day Pumpkinville lived a Hispanic whore named Rita Totorica. Her pimp was a black man named Messiah Nazarene. Rita had a child, a daughter named Loofah. Loofah was the only thing that made Rita's life worth living.

The Midwest winter underway that year was more brutal than any Rita could remember. It made her job extra hard. Rita was hardly a high-class, call-girl-style whore. She worked the streets and serviced her johns in chilly cars and frigid alleys. Rita never managed to feel warm enough during these months, even when she finally stumbled wearily home, to her drafty tenement. But Rita never troubled herself over her own arduous working conditions half so much as she obsessed about Loofah's comfort. She always made sure the girl was dressed warm, ate as well as Rita could afford to feed her, and got the majority of the blankets in the bed they shiveringly shared.

But all of Rita's precautions and ministrations failed to prevent Loofah from contracting pneumonia that winter.

Loofah hid her condition as long as she could, not wanting to add to her mother's

VINE-RIPENED MISERY

2 Wilberine Panthalassa played acoustic guitar every Friday and Saturday night in a small Cambridge, Massachusetts, bar called Skwat 2P. Skwat 2P catered exclusively to the lesbian trade, and Wilberine's songs conformed to an Ani DiFranco-Indigo Girls esthetic: lots of indignant angst, topical think-pieces and deep soul-searching.

7 One of her most-requested numbers was 'Vine-Ripened Misery', a protest against 'Frankenfoods'. The song had even gotten some local airplay and engendered a couple of protest actions.

The applause had just died down for her last set of the evening one Saturday when Wilberine noticed for the first time a very attractive woman eyeing her from across the room.

The woman's cheeks were mottled white and pink like the inner flesh of a strawberry, her hair was the color of corn and her eyes were violet as plums. Her semi-exposed breasts were ripe cantaloupes, the roundels of her jeans-clad ass twin baby pumpkins.

Wilberine idled over to the bar, and the stranger smiled and offered some sincere compliments on the music. After several stiff drinks – double 'Rosie O'Daniels' – Wilberine found herself back in her Somerville apartment with the woman, whose name, it turned out, was Calyx DeSoyle.

In bed, Wilberine was astonished to find that Calyx's essential secretions tasted exactly like hard cider. As Calyx's thighs clamped Wilberine's head and hands, the musician found herself becoming somewhat woozy from ingestion of the unnatural secretions. Her vision began to grow hazy. Suddenly she felt pinpricks from Calyx's legs, which were crossed atop Wilberine's back. It was almost as if hundreds of questing rootlets were delving into Wilberine's flesh.

Struggling to free herself, Wilberine scratched frantically at Calyx's inner thigh. A flesh-colored patch of plastic like a large Band-aid peeled away. Even with her fading vision, Wilberine could make out the tattoo the patch had concealed.

The Monsanto logo had never looked so frightening.

« Utterly rational, the saurians of Atlantis were simply incapable of conceiving of extra-physical deities, forces or customs »

burdens. By the time the brave girl's distress was apparent to Rita, Loofah was grievously ill.

Rita skipped a night of work and used the money her pimp was expecting to collect to bring Loofah to a clinic and buy her some antibiotics.

When Messiah Nazarene showed up the next day to demand his overdue monies – and found the cash unavailable – he expressed loud anger at Rita's absence the previous night and at her misappropriation of funds. The way he played with his long sharp knife further revealed his emotional disquietude.

Messiah Nazarene was considerate enough of the feverishly sleeping Loofah and the neighbors who might be inclined to call the cops upon hearing screams to drag Rita down into the dank, earth-floored basement of the tenement to administer Rita's punishment.

When the first drop of Rita's blood

touched the dirt floor, the soil erupted as if a handful of dragon's teeth had been sown. Up from the dirt sprang a single naked creature resembling Jack Pumpkinhead of Oz. If the pleasantly goofy Jack had sported flaming eyes, sharp bone teeth and thorny claws.

By the time the pumpkin avenger had finished with Messiah Nazarene, there wasn't enough left of the man to make a pimp sandwich.

On her knees, Rita finally dared to look up at her savior. She confronted the pumpkin man's unique yet comprehensibly functional genitals. Rita rewarded her savior the way she knew best.

Nine months later, she regretted swallowing the pumpkin seeds Jack had emitted at climax. But Loofah welcomed her new baby brother. Even if his eyes did scorch all her books when she tried to read to him.

THE EVOLUTION OF SUPERSTITION

It is a little-known fact that Atlantis was populated by intelligent dinosaurs.

2 The last refuge of a flourishing yet numerically sparse race millions of years old, the island nation was remarkable 8 not only for the level of its scientific achievements but for the fact that its citizens had no conception of religion, magic or superstition. Utterly rational, the saurians of Atlantis were simply incapable of conceiving of extra-physical deities, forces or customs.

One day the protective force-field that enclosed the entire island of Atlantis and shielded it from intrusion failed for approximately twenty-four minutes. Just long enough for the waves to wash ashore the sole survivor of a Phoenician shipwreck.

Yam Mot, priest of Baal, dragged himself a bit further up the sands of Atlantis, then fell unconscious. Yam Mot awoke in a huge luxurious bed. At the first signs of awareness, an enormous lizard snout heaved into Yam Mot's field of vision. Convinced he had passed into the afterlife, Yam Mot began to recite the appropriate prayers and invocations to whatever god might be ready to judge him.

Much to the priest's surprise, the lizard head addressed him in perfectly good Phoenician, asking if Yam Mot would care for something to eat. Later, the lizard informed Yam Mot that the Atlanteans could not, of course, let him leave, to spread news of their secret haven. But otherwise, they gave him complete freedom of their nation.

It took a few days to convince Yam Mot that he had not actually died. But when he finally understood his true situation, he found cause to rejoice. Here was a whole race of unbelievers to convert. Open-minded to a flaw, the dinosaurs would intellectually digest the sacred lore they could not derive on their own, and thus perhaps reach the divine.

Within six months, half of Atlantis was pitted against the other half, arguing over the superiority of Astarte versus Baal.

Within a year, open warfare had broken out, a thing unprecedented in over one hundred million years of saurian history.

Eighteen months after the arrival of Yam Mot, the Astarte camp unleashed their tectonic disrupters, while the Baal sect sank dozens of destructive magma taps.

As Yam Mot clung to the few dry cubits of the highest tower in Atlantis, now sinking rapidly beneath the waves, he uttered a final prayer of thanks to all the gods of his people. His bold words soared above the harsh bellows of the drowning dinosaurs.

The precious souls of yet another race had been saved!

Jay Lake

Americans are all rich, even their dead.

Pobrecito knows this because he spends the hottest parts of the day in the old *Cementerio Americano* down by the river. The water is fat and lazy while the pipes in the *colonia* drip only rust brown as the eyes of Santa Marguerite. Their graves are of the finest marble, carved with photographs in some manner he does not understand, or wrought with sculpted angels that put the churches up the hill to shame. Some of the American dead even have little houses, tight boxes with broken doors that must have once contained great riches.

He sits within a drooping tree which fights with life and watches the flies make dark, wiggling rafts out on the water. There are dogs which live in the broken-backed jet out in the middle of the current, eyes glowing from behind the dozens of little shattered oval windows. At night the dogs swim across the slow current and run the river banks, hunting in the *colonia* and up toward the city walls.

They are why he never sleeps in the *Cementerio*. That some of the dogs walk on two legs only makes them worse.

When he was very young, Pobrecito found a case of magazines, old ones with bright color pictures of men and women without their clothes. Whoever had made the magazines had an astonishing imagination, because in Pobrecito's experience most people who fucked seemed to do it either with booze or after a lot of screaming and fighting and being held down. There weren't very many ways he'd ever seen it gone after. The people in these pictures were smiling, mostly, and arranged themselves more carefully than priests arranging a corpse. And they lived in the most astonishing places.

Pobrecito clips or tears the pictures out a few at a time and sells them on the streets of the *colonia*. He knows the magazines themselves would just be taken from him, before or after a beating, but a kid with a few slips of paper clutched in his hand is nothing. As long as no one looks too closely. But even if he had a pass for the gates, he would dare not take them within the

walls, for the priests would hang him in the square.

What he loves most about the magazines is not the nudity or the fucking or the strange combinations and arrangements these people found themselves in. No, what he loves is that these are Americans. Beautiful people in beautiful places doing beautiful things together.

"I will be an American some day," he tells his friend Lucia. They are in the branches of the dying tree, sharing a bottle of *pulque* and a greasy bowl of fried plantains in the midday heat. Pobrecito has a secret place up there, a hollow in the trunk where he hides most of his treasures.

The magazines are stored elsewhere, in a place he has never even shown to Lucia.

"You are an idiot," she declares, glancing out at the airplane in the river. The American flag can still be seen on its tall tail, small and weathered. No one has gone out to paint it over, for fear of the dogs. "All Americans are dead," she adds with prim authority.

Lucia is smaller than Pobrecito, though older. She is one of the *menoritas*, born to be little. Though she is of an age to have breasts and make her bleedings, her body is smooth and slick as any young child's. Pobrecito knows this because they often curl together to sleep, and she likes him to touch her as if she were a baby, rubbing his hand over her sides and back and pulling her to his chest. He has tried to use his fingers to do a few of the things seen in his pictures, but she is too small down there both before and behind, and complains of the hurt.

She has never offered to touch him.

Pobrecito shakes off that thought. "What is dead can be reborn. This is what the priests are always telling us." He grins, mottled teeth flashing even in shadow. "I shall bleach my skin and hair like they did, and have a fine house filled with swimming pools and bright furniture. My automobiles will be colorful and shiny and actually have petrol."

The American Dead

She laughs then and sets her shoulder against his chest, tucking her head into his neck, sucking on the neck of the *pulque* bottle in a way which makes him both warm and uncomfortable. He strokes her hair and dreams of distant, lost cities such as Los Angeles and Omaha.

That evening the folk of the *colonia* are upset. They surge through the muddy streets, even the day workers who should already be sleeping, and there is an angry mutter like bottle wasps swarming. He even sees some weapons, knives dangling from hands, a few pistols tucked into belts. These are offenses of the worst order, to keep or carry weapons.

Pobrecito dodges booted feet and moves with the crowd, listening. He already knows he will sell no pictures tonight. Selling no pictures, he will not eat tomorrow. But he wants to understand what is wrong.

The crowd is speaking of priests.

"Girls, indeed."

"...a scandal. And they use God's name!"

"They wear those black dresses. Let them lie with one another."

"Called them up there from a list. I tell you, I won't allow my—"

"Hush! Do you want to hang?"

"A tax. How is this a tax?"

"Their time is coming. Soon."

Pobrecito comes to understand. Girls are being taken away by the priests. To be used, he supposes, like the Americans in his pictures use each other. Will the girls of the *colonia* smile beneath the lusts of the priests? Surely they will be cleaned and fed and cared for. It is the priests in their walled city that hold all wealth, all power.

But eventually the anger melts into fatigue, and word comes that the *guardia* are on their way down to the *colonia*, and so the knives and pistols vanish and people trudge home, some of them weeping more than usual.



Over the weeks, a few more girls are called every few days, always the hale ones with good curves to their breasts. The *guardia* comes to collect them now, as the people are no longer willing to send their sisters and daughters up the hill simply because a summons comes. There are beatings and a few quiet murders in which no priest-advocate will take any interest.

None of the girls come back.

In a few months' time, some older women are called, and younger girls as well. They do not return, either. The *colonia* remains restless, but the crystallizing anger of the first night never quite reappears. There is always food to worry about, and the dogs from the river, and the clouds of flies and wasps which can strip a man's skin in minutes, and the sicknesses which prowl just as deadly if less visible.

And the heat.

It is always a little hotter. This has been the way of things all of Pobrecito's life.

The vanishing girls and women are good for Pobrecito's little business. Sad men and wild-eyed boys buy from him, paying him in dented cans of dog food or little bundles of yams or onions. Even a few of the old women seek him out, clucking and tutting like senile chickens draped in funeral black, wanting pictures "of a girl alone, none of your despicable filth, just something to remember her by."

But he is becoming too well known, too rich. He has more food than he and Lucia can eat in a day, and even a few metal tools and some old bits of gold, which he hides in his tree by the river.

Is he rich enough to be an American yet, Pobrecito wonders?

One day he makes his way into the *Cementerio Americano* carrying two books and an old bottle of wine he has been paid for a handful of pictures of three thin, yellow-haired women kissing each other. By habit Pobrecito keeps to the shadows, the edges of fences and tumbled walls, but also by habit he has made a path in and out of this place. He steps around the edge of a rotting shed which contains a flat-tired tractor and some large metal implements to find three of the *guardia*.

"Ah," says Pobrecito, and reflexively offers them the wine. Perhaps it will save him from whatever is next. He doubts that, though.

The leader, for he has more decoration on his buttoned shoulder tabs, strokes the bright leather of his pistol belt for a moment, then smiles. It is a horrid sort of smile, something a man remembering an old photo he is trying to imitate might offer up. The other two do not bother. Instead they merely cradle a machete each, staring corpse-eyed at Pobrecito. All three of them are fat, their bellies bigger than their hips, unlike anyone in the *colonia*, except a few who are dying of growths in their guts.

No one takes the wine.

"You are the guardian of Lucia Sandoz, is it not true?" the leader asks.

This is not what Pobrecito expected. "Ah...no. She comes here sometimes."

The leader consults a thin notebook, ragged with handling, pages nearly black with ink. "You are Pobrecito the street merchant, no address, of the *colonia*."

"Yes."

"Then you are the guardian of Lucia Sandoz. It says so here in my book, and so this must be a true thing." His smile asserts itself again. "We have a summons for her." All three *guardia* peer

around, as if expecting her to fall from the sky. Pobrecito realizes this has become an old game for them.

"She is not mine," he says to his feet. Not Lucia. "And besides," he adds, "she is a *menorita*. She cannot be used in the manner of a woman." Will this help?

They laugh, his tormentors, before one of the machete-carriers says, "How would you know if you hadn't had her?"

The leader leans close. "She is *clean*, boy. That is enough these days."

Then they beat him, using the flat of the machete blades and the rough toes of their boots. Pobrecito loses most of his left ear when a blade slips, and the palm of his hand is cut to the bone, but they stop before staving in his ribs or breaking any large bones.

"Find her," says the leader. Pobrecito can barely hear him through the pain and blood in his ear. The *guardia* tears the pages of the books from their bindings, unzips, and urinates on the paper. Taking the wine bottle, he turns to leave. "Before tomorrow."

Pobrecito does not waste time on crying. He stumbles to his tree, knowing there are some extra clothes there that he can use to bind his ear and his hand. There are so many sicknesses that come in through bloody cuts and sores – black rot, green rot, the red crust – and he fears them all.

Stumbling, eyes dark and head ringing, Pobrecito can barely climb his tree because his arms and legs hurt so much. When he reaches the branch, he sees that someone has been at his cache of riches and food. *Guardia*, dogs, it does not matter. The hollow in the trunk has been hacked open, made wide and ragged with an ax or a machete, and everything that is not gone is smashed or torn or broken. His riches are nothing but trash now.

"I will never be an American," Pobrecito whispers. He lays his mutilated ear against the slashed palm of his hand, pressing them together to slow the bleeding and protect the wounds from insects. Despite the pain, he lays that side of his head against the branch and stretches out to surrender to the ringing darkness.

"Wake up, fool!" It is Lucia's voice. She is slapping him.

Pobrecito feels strange. His skin is itchy, crawly, prickly. More slaps.

"Stop it this instant!" Her voice is rising toward a frightening break.

He opens his mouth to answer her and flies tumble in.

He is covered in flies.

"Gaaah!" Pobrecito screams.

"Get them off before they bite," she says, her voice more under control.

Pobrecito stumbles to his feet, runs down the branch where it overhangs the water.

"Not the river..." she says behind him, but it is too late. The old branch narrows, is rotten, his legs are weak, his eyes not clear. In a crackling shower of wood, flies and blood, Pobrecito tumbles the five or six meters downward to slam into the slow, brown water, knocking the air from his body.

The river is blood warm, shocking him awake. He is under the surface, eyes open to a uniform brown with no way up. The water is sticky, strange, clinging to him, trying to draw him down. Pobrecito kicks his legs, trying to come out, but there is still no up.

At least the flies are gone.

He begins to wonder if he could open his mouth and find something besides the burning in his empty lungs.

Something scrapes his legs. Something long, slow and powerful. Pobrecito throws his hands out and finds a stick. He pulls on it, but it does not come, so he pulls himself toward it.

A moment later he is gasping and muddy, clinging to a root sticking out from the river bank. Air is in his lungs, blessed air. Behind him the water burbles as the long, slow, powerful thing circles back to test him again. Out in the middle of the river, the dogs are barking.

Lucia is scrambling down the tree trunk, sobbing. "Fool! Idiot!"

She helps him pull himself out before his legs are taken. He lies on the bank gasping and crying, blessedly free of flies. He does not want to think about what the river water might have done to his wounds. "They...they came...they came for you..." he spits out.

"No one wants me," she says fiercely.

"They said you were *clean*. That clean was enough for them these days."

She is quiet for a moment. "Fire-piss is killing the rich men up in the city, the old women say. The priests have heard from God that to fuck a clean woman takes the fire-piss from the man and gives it to her."

"How do you know? No one comes back."

"Some people pass in and out of the walls. Servants. Farmers. The word comes. And the cemetery is overflowing, up on the hill. With rich city men." She stares at him for a moment. "The *colonia* girls they dump down the old wells with some quicklime and gravel, and a prayer if they're feeling generous."

"Ahhh..." He weeps, eyes filling with hot tears as they hadn't for the beating, or for anything in his memory, really. "And they want you now."

"The cure does not work, but it does not stop them from trying over and over. The priests say it is so, that they are not faithful enough. Up in the city, they believe they can make the world however they want it." She stares at him for a while. "And perhaps they have a taste for new girls all the time."

Pobrecito thinks about his American pictures. Obviously many people had a taste for new girls all the time. Has he somehow been feeding this evil? But he doesn't sell his pictures in the city, or even to city men. Not directly. He has always wondered if some of his buyers did.

And if he could make the world the way he wanted it, he would wish away the heat and the insects and the sicknesses. He would make them all Americans like in his pictures, naked, happy, pale-skinned blondes with big houses and tables full of food and more water than any sane person could ever use. He would not wish for more girls to kill. Not even if God told him to.

"I want to show you something," he says.

"Show me soon. I think the dogs are coming over."

"In the day?"

"You got their attention, my friend."

Out at the airplane, dogs are gathering on the wing, their feet in the slow water. Some of them are casting sticks and stones out into the river, looking for that great predator that had touched Pobrecito for a moment. Others growl through pointed teeth, eyes glowing at him. Smoke curls from some of the shattered oval windows. Great red and blue letters, faded and worn as the tail's flag, loom along the rounded top of the airplane in some American prayer for the coming assault.

"It is over anyway," he says. "Come." He leads her deeper into the *Cementerio Americano*. Here Pobrecito has always been careful to

hop from stone to stone, scramble along mortared kerbs, step on open ground, never making a path.

Here among the houses of the American dead is his greatest treasure.

He shows Lucia a squared-off vault, door wedged tightly shut. Grabbing a cornice, Pobrecito pulls himself to the roof though his body strains with the pain of the beating and the curious ache of his fall into the river. He then dangles his arm over to help her up. There are two windows in the roof, and he knows the secret of loosening one.

In a moment they are in the cool darkness of the vault. There are two marble coffins here, carved with wreaths and flowers, and Pobrecito's precious box of magazines at one end. He has left a few supplies here, a can of drinkable water and some dried fruit, a homespun shirt without quite enough holes for it to disintegrate to ragged patches. And matches, his other great treasure.

"These people do not seem so wealthy," Lucia whispers. "This is a fine little house for them, but the only riches here are yours."

Pobrecito shrugs. "Perhaps they were robbed before I found them. Or perhaps their riches are within their coffins. This is a finer room than any you or I will ever live or die in." As soon as he says that last, he wishes he hadn't, as they may very well die in this room.

"So now what will you do?"

He pulls the magazines out of their box, fans the pages open. Sleek American flesh in a hundred combinations flashes before his eyes, cocks, breasts, tongues, leather and plastic toys, sleek cars...all the world that was, once. The American world lost to the heat and the sicknesses. Pobrecito tosses the magazines into a pile, deliberately haphazard. After a few moments, Lucia begins to help, tearing a few apart, breaking their spines so they will lay flat. She ignores the pictures, though she is not so used to them as Pobrecito is.

Soon they have a glossy pile of images of the perfect past. Without another word, Pobrecito strikes a match and sets fire to a bright, curled edge. Cool faces, free of sweat and wounds, blacken and shrivel. He lights more matches, sets more edges of the pile on fire, until the flames take over.

The smoke stinks, filling the little vault, curling around the opening in the roof. He does not care, though Lucia is coughing. Pobrecito pulls off his wet, bloody clothes and pushes them into the base of the fire, then climbs atop one of the marble coffins. A few moments later, Lucia joins him.

She is naked as well.

They lie there on the bed of marble, smooth skinned as any American, kissing and touching, while the fire burns the pretty people in their pretty houses and the smoke rises through the roof. Outside dogs howl and *guardia* pistols crack.

When Lucia takes his cock in her mouth, Pobrecito knows he is as wealthy as any American. A while later he feels the hot rush of himself into her, even as the smoke makes him so dizzy his thoughts have spun off into the sky like so many airplanes rising from their river grave.

Soon he will be a true American, wealthy and dead.

Jay Lake lives and works in Portland, Oregon. He is the 2004 winner of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. His first novel, *Rocket Science*, has been very well received. His next novel, *Trial of Flowers*, is due out in September from Night Shade Books and he has just signed a two-book contract with Tor.

AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MAKE BELIEVE

George Goodspeed was the first man to circumnavigate the universe.

As twenty-first-century scientists had theorized, the topology of the cosmos was such that it had no edges. To travel in any direction in a straight line for a sufficient distance meant that one would inevitably arrive at one's starting point again. But traveling the distances necessary to prove this theory – on the order of billions of lightyears – was an insurmountable obstacle.

Until the invention of the Goodspeed Drive.

The Goodspeed Drive achieved a velocity approaching one million lightyears per hour. Even so, circumnavigating the plenum would require nearly two years of constant flight.

Goodspeed was up to the task. A dauntless explorer as well as a laboratory genius – he had been the first human to set foot on Ragovoy IV, where the living continents reacted with ire to any foreign tread – Goodspeed equipped his one-person ship, the *Eternal Recurrence*, with two years' worth of food, entertainment discs and objects of intellectual curiosity, then set off, basking in the acclaim of the entire human race.

The voyage passed reasonably fast. Cybernetic overseers kept the ship functioning and on course, leaving Goodspeed free to pass the time in idleness, sleep, amusement and lofty thinking. By the end of the first year, he had disproven Godel's Incompleteness Theorem and invented a self-flattening toothpaste tube which insured that not a squidge of paste was wasted.

A remarkable feature of the Goodspeed Drive was that it went from zero to a million lights in no time flat, as soon as it was activated. Likewise, any vessel so equipped would come to a complete stop once the Drive was shut off.

Goodspeed halted at intervals during his trip, photographing strange galaxies which he used as landmarks in his progress and as proof of his journey.

At the final moment dictated by his calculations, Goodspeed flicked the Drive off for the last time.

He was closer to Earth than the Moon itself. The instant he made radio contact with the home planet, the whole world erupted with joy.

Goodspeed landed under conventional power, was whisked away and soon found himself the subject of a ticker-tape parade in Paris, the capitol of the world community.

After two years of hermit-like existence, Goodspeed discovered that it was somewhat hard to be instantly sociable. So at first he chalked up the curiously off-kilter conversations he was experiencing to his atrophied social skills. But as his car floated down the Champs-de-Mars, Goodspeed saw a sight that instantly confirmed his suspicions that all was not right with the Earth he had returned to.

In place of the Eiffel Tower stood a hundred-foot-tall statue of a one-eyed demon of ferocious mien.

Goodspeed whirled on his host, the Mayor of Paris, and said, "My god, what is that monstrosity?"

The Mayor performed an arcane mudra, then said, "M'sieur Goodspeed, your historic accomplishments do not entitle you to blaspheme the figure of Collembola the Orgulous!"

Quickly Goodspeed performed certain mental calculations in light of this new knowledge, and realized what had happened.

The universe was spatially contiguous but temporally discontinuous. At some point, Goodspeed's ship had jumped across an entire Big Bang/Big Crunch cycle and ended up in new, partially convergent era, billions of years in the future. He was forever exiled from the familiar, comforting Earth he knew.

Goodspeed shrugged. What could he do? It was just as Mark Twain had said in his classic novel, *Tom Trickster of the Cree Confederacy*: "You can't go home again."

Paul Di Filippo has a novel coming out from DH Press in May: *Time's Black Lagoon*, a time-travel story featuring the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Also in May is a new collection – containing this very piece – from Thunder's Mouth: *Shuteye For The Timebroker*. February 2006 marked the one year anniversary of the Di Filippos' acquisition of an invaluable member of the household: Brownie the cocker spaniel. Paul continues to offer tours of Lovecraftian sights to any visitor to Providence, Rhode Island. Paul has published a great many stories in *Interzone* over the years, most recently 'Harsh Oases' in issue 201, and 'The Emperor of Gondwanaland' in issue 196 which has been selected for at least one best-of-2005 anthology.

LINK TO TODD SCHORR'S PAINTINGS: www.toddschorr.com/Gallery/Previous%201/index.html

THE DAWN OF MIRACLES

Hurting, despairing, Mica Moondragon had been trapped in the cavern for thirty-six hours now, and was starting to go a little insane.

An amateur spelunker, Mica took every precaution in his underground forays. But even the best equipment and most cautious approaches could not contend with a sharp stalagmite, a severed rope, and the subsequent fall of some forty feet down a tall, exitless chimney that had resulted in two broken legs.

Mica, a loner without many friends or any family, had told no one of his weekend expedition. His only hope was that when Monday came, his unexplained absence from work would result in a call to his home and a subsequent all-points-bulletin.

But probably not. Everyone might surmise he had just flitted off irresponsibly. And even if anyone sought to track him, what traces had he left to point to his current location? Very, very few.

No, things did not look sanguine for Mica's rescue.

Mica had gone through his entire rations – two breakfast bars – in the first twenty-four hours. His liquid sustenance had come from a nearby drip that tasted like licking the bottom of a zinc pot. To conserve the batteries of his miraculously unshattered lamp, Mica had taken to lighting it only at two-hour intervals.

Lying in the darkest darkness imaginable, Mica had found his vision playing tricks. Phantom images, faces and scenes from his past, would arise and dissipate. After some time, he learned to ignore them.

But the latest apparition bore no relationship to his personal history. Which was why Mica knew he was cracking up.

A luminescent nude goddess seemed to hover in the chilly air of the cavern. Radiantly blue, the ethereal female possessed an attenuated form, almost serpentine in the proportions of her limbs and torso. She seemed to writhe in midair.

Helplessly hoping, berating himself for a desperate fool even as he did so, Mica extended his hand upward to the floating deity.

He could see his hand dimly in the light cast by the goddess! Could she be real – ?

Mica's fingers touched those of the chthonic woman. There came a blinding flash of light. When Mica's vision returned, he found himself outdoors, under the homely, gorgeous light of the sun!

Flicking his forked tongue joyously to taste the thickly scented open air, Mica slithered happily away through the wet grass.

CHARMING HAECKEL'S SERPENT

India called.

Ever since his earliest memories, Homer Haeckel had felt an uncanny kinship with a land and culture as far removed from his birthplace – Muncie, Indiana – as could be. From the very first time he had seen pictures of that exotic nation, Homer had sensed a deep connection between his soul and that of the Asian subcontinent. When the concept of reincarnation was introduced to his young brain, Homer had an explanation at last for his affinity with all things Hindu.

Assuredly, he had spent one or more previous lifetimes in India. Of this he was increasingly certain, as the years passed and every encounter with the clothing, cuisine and customs of India brought a jab of recognition 'way down low in his gut. The trappings of his American life began to chafe and pall.

Finally, when he attained the age of eighteen, Homer Haeckel achieved the practical means and freedom to voyage to the land of his dreams.

Bidding what he expected was a permanent goodbye to his tearful parents, Homer boarded his flight to the realm where he would finally feel at home.

Walking the streets of Calcutta, Homer moved in a daze of glory. Every rancid smell, every discordant sound, every glimpse of beggarly flesh or Brahmin robes convinced him that he was among his own kind.

After some time, Homer encountered a sidewalk snake-charmer. The elderly, turbaned, bearded fellow sat crosslegged, a dhoti his only clothing, piping to a basket of serpents.

Astonishingly, Homer began to feel an erection blooming. How could this be? There was nothing conventionally erotic about this situation. But it was as if his penis was responding directly to the swami's music.

The swami seemed to take notice of Homer's embarrassing tentpole and, after finishing his act and accepting a few coins from onlookers, he beckoned Homer over. Homer approached the man and dropped down to the dirty mat where the swami sat. The swami whispered in accented but perfectly intelligible English, "I see your lingham has returned home at last."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Your male organ. It is Hindu in origin. That is what has drawn you here."

"But, but – what about the rest of me? My soul –"

The swami chuckled. "You are in the grip of an intellectual fallacy, young man. None of us has a unified soul. Instead, we are just a collection of disparate allegiances, each tethered to one particular organ or another. Every individual is a patchwork, reshuffled from a welter of ethnic parts at birth. You, I can see, for instance, possess a liver from Greece, a heart from Sweden and a left foot from Ireland. But your lingham is definitely Hindu, of that I am certain."

Stunned, Homer arose and stumbled off.

The forty-five-year-old Homer Haeckel is quite happy in his role as a janitor at the United Nations.

It's the only place every single part of him feels at home.

INTO THE VALLEY OF FINKS AND WEIRDOS

I stepped off the flying eyeball that I had ridden over from my workshop and pulled up a seat in front of the bandstand. Paul Revere and the Raiders were playing 'Kicks', and the teenyboppers were Frugging and Swimming like there was no tomorrow.

And of course, there wasn't.

Since the Global Groove Bomb had exploded in 1967, we all lived in a perpetual moment of changeless change.

Be Here Now. Forever.

One of the beehive-haired waitresses rollerskated to my table and I ordered a platter of Big Boy Burgers, a side of fries and an LSD shake.

While I was waiting for my food, a member of the Rat Fink tribe ambled over, pulled out a chair and sat down across from me.

I gave the hairy, big-eared thing a soul grip. "Hey, Scuz, what's shaking?"

The Fink grinned – a three-foot-wide expanse of rotten green teeth – and said, "Drag race on Roth Boulevard at noon. Cosmic Gearshifter versus Magwheel Marvin. The prize is ten keys of Maui Zowie. Free samples for the crowd."

I yawned. "Done there, been that. What else you got?"

"There's the regular tsunami due at dusk down at Laguna. Massive curls for all the happy groms."

"Wipeout city, as far as I'm concerned."

Rat Fink frowned. "Gee, Dutch, you're no fun lately."

My burgers showed up, but I wasn't hungry anymore. I sighed. "I know, I know, Scuz. Even the joys of detailing hotrods have paled for me. Life has turned super-grotty in my eyes. I can't find my kicks anymore."

Rat Fink waved one arm around at the surrounding spectacle sprawled across the palm-tree-dotted landscape. Dragsters zoomed, orgies churned, be-ins and happenings exfoliated.

"Even with all this, you're bored?"

"'Fraid so, old bopster."

"You are seriously harshing my mellow, Dutch. What do you want out of life?"

"Contrast. There's no contrast anymore. How can we be cool if there are no squares to freak out?"

Rat Fink assumed a look of intense concentration. "I could pretend to be square..."

I regarded six hundred pounds of snaggle-toothed, ball-snouted monster affectionately, then clapped Rat Fink heartily on his wire-furred shoulder. "Thanks, pal, but it just wouldn't work. I gotta split now. Catch you on the flipside."

I rode the next eyeball out to Kesey's place. When I got there Ken and the gang were just heading for the Fillmore. I went with them in the Bus for lack of anything better to do. After the show, I fell asleep in the middle of making love to Janis Joplin.

Man, it was either put on a suit and get a job or kill myself!

But there were no more suits, and no more jobs, and nobody had seen Death lately either.

« Since the Global Groove Bomb had exploded in 1967, we all lived in a perpetual moment of changeless change. Be Here Now. Forever »

elizabeth bear wane





Garrett lowered her gaze from

the beaten-copper diameter of a rising moon to regard the soft-eyed wampyr beside her. The dark fabric of his sleeve lay smooth under her fingertips. A breeze still tasting of winter ruffled the forensic sorcerer's carefully arranged hair and shifted the jewels in her earlobes. "Thank you for coming, Sebastien."

"On the contrary, Abby Irene," the Great Detective murmured through lips that barely moved. "What man could refuse your company of an evening?" A lifted eyebrow made the double entendre express. The moonlight lay like a rush of blood across his cheeks, making Don Sebastien de Ulloa look almost alive. "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?"

"Perhaps in my youth."

"To a connoisseur, value increases with time."

She permitted herself an unladylike snort. Sebastien waited until it was plain she wouldn't answer. "In any case, I'm flattered by the invitation. Although I fear we must be home by dawn. From what I hear of her Grace's parties, we'll miss the best part. Shall we go inside?"

"I suppose we must. The Mayor will be here."

"Simply *everyone* will be here, my dear. On all sides of the issue – come to fawn on the Prince, or spit on his back." Sebastien handed her up the sweeping front steps of the Duke of New Amsterdam's palatial residence, and she presented her invitation to the butler.

"Detective Crown Investigator Abigail Irene Garrett," the Duke's gentleman said. "And Don Sebastien de Ulloa. Be welcome in my master's house."

"Lady Abigail Irene will do tonight, Seamus," Garrett replied with a formal smile. "Unless you plan to host a murder."

"Oh, no –" But Garrett was already tugging Sebastien over the threshold. She might stumble or bolt if she delayed, so instead she forged ahead to the ballroom. She knew the way.

Sebastien chuckled and hurried to keep up. "What a time for a ball," he said into her ear. She felt the coolness of what passed for his breath.

"The eve of war seems to you a strange time to celebrate?"

The wampyr smiled sideways at the dryness of her tone, leaning close enough that she could smell his skin, like dead leaves in autumn. "Exiles must celebrate where they may."

Shaking her head slightly, closing her eyes in rue, Abigail Irene Garrett entered her rival's den. Jacqueline, the Duchess of New Amsterdam, was renowned for her velvet soirees, for fantasies and folderols, for balls and banquets. Renowned for making the most of whatever society the New World had to offer, and making it her own. She was the wife of the man Garrett loved.

"You're flushing," Sebastien whispered into her hair. "You need champagne, I think." He led her across to the ballroom and fetched a glass, collecting another that he retained untouched.

"The guest of honor isn't here yet." She let her hand drop from his arm and turned to observe the room, raising the flute to lips incarnadined with paint.

"Ah, yes." Sebastien cocked his head to one side, listening. "His Highness Prince Henry of Britain, brother and heir to King Phillip and favored emissary, on his tour of the Americas. At least once a decade whether they need him to or not. The dirigible arrived from Tenochtitlán yesterday."

"I'm surprised you didn't come to view the landing. It was spectacular." The colonies didn't see much airship travel, even in the dawning years of the 20th century. Peter Eliot, the Lord Mayor of New Amsterdam, had been there with his wife in her French gown and her diamonds, every artifact of dress a political statement in these days of near-open warfare between the Empire and the French. Mohawk sorcerers might have been blamed for the massacre at St Johnsbury in the Green Mountains, but Garrett knew that the Native warriors must be supplied with modern weapons out of Quebec. The Mayor, she suspected, would cheerfully turn to the French if it meant home rule for the colonies.

"In the balmy afternoon sun? Abby Irene, I believed you thought more highly of me." He took the empty glass from her hand and replaced it with his own. Lightly, so quickly she didn't think anyone in the room would have noticed, he brushed a fingertip across the scarlet sorcerer's tattoo over her breastbone, just visible in the décolletage of her gown. Daring for an older woman, but Garrett believed in getting away with whatever she could. "There. A much more becoming flush, I think. You're upset for your Duke, señora?"

The light laughter sounded forced even to her. "It's not the Duke, Sebastien. And you know I never married."

"Señorita." He awarded her the point with a smile. "Or the Duchess either?"

She sighed. "It's the Prince."

"Abigail Irene. You do impress."

"Long over," she replied. "I came to America."

"I wondered why. Does Richard know?"

She finished Sebastien's champagne. "Duke Richard?" The lightest possible emphasis. "I rather imagine he wouldn't have let his wife invite me, if he did. He has an eye for propriety, our Duke. Shall we dance?"

"Unless you care for another glass of champagne." A kiss of irony as he lifted the glass from her fingers and set it aside.

She felt eyes upon her as she straightened a hothouse rose in his buttonhole. The damasked petals felt like silk. She imagined they matched the flush marking her cheeks. "I'm giddy enough," she said, and glanced up, expecting Richard's gaze pale under bark-brown curls or a fish-eyed glare from Peter Eliot.

Instead, dark eyes glittered in a sailor's deep lined squint as Henry, Prince of England, looked back at her and offered up a slow, deep, self-possessed smile. He wore a goatee now, she observed – even as her breath jammed in her throat and tore – though his curls were still black as Japanese lacquer. He stared at her over the shoulder of her lover, Duke Richard, who bent close to whisper in his ear. The Prince laid tapered fingers on the Duke's shoulder, shook his head once gently to end the conversation, and came down the steps. A cool breeze from some open window brushed Garrett's cheek.

"Excuse me," Garrett turned to whisper to Sebastien, but the

wampyr had already slipped away. She smelled citrus and ambergris and bit the inside of her cheek until her eyes stopped stinging. It was only a moment, but by the time she looked forward again, Henry of England was bowing over her hand. She would have thought herself numb enough to feel nothing, but his fingers tickled her skin through kid; she almost closed her eyes. "Your – Highness."

"Abby Irene," he answered, and *now* she felt the Mayor's eyes searing the nape of her neck, felt Richard's and Jacqueline's gazes on her face like hands raised to her cheek in question. "The New World has been kind to you."

"Intermittently. Champagne, your Highness?"

"I think I had better not." The smile carved deeper furrows beside his eyes. A green jewel dripped rakishly from his left earlobe. "I recognize your escort, by the way. Do you know –"

"It's a well-kept secret, but yes."

"Ah."

He stared at her throat. She was glad she'd worn the low-cut gown and suffered her hair to be piled up tall. The small white scars weren't on her neck: Sebastien was considerate. She smiled through the numbness. "He's a friend. How's your wife?"

"Pregnant again. May I call on you in private tomorrow, Crown Investigator?"

The title drew her back. Henry never said anything he didn't mean to carry several meanings. *This is official.* "Highness? Could I deny you?" *Would I, if this were a personal visit?* She didn't know the answer, even now. The Atlantic, it seemed, hadn't been as wide as she had thought.

"Anon, then." A quick bow, and he was gone, leaving Garrett to hide her urge to stand and stare after the Prince's retreating back like a terrified doe. She turned in time to catch the Lord Mayor's eye still on her, his lanky red-haired wife posed beside him in marten and gold and emeralds. The fabric falling back from her fashionably pale hand was a royal blue so dark it was almost violet, and Garret wished she had a wine glass to raise in a silent, mocking toast. Instead, she twined fingers in the jade moiré silk of her skirts and let her steps carry her toward the Eliots, Peter and Cecelia. A blonde head moved through the crowd: Duchess Jacqueline trying to intercept her, but Richard's wife would not be quick enough.

Cecelia had evaporated by the time Garrett reached her goal, but she succeeded in catching up with the Lord Mayor. She reached past him to liberate a canapé from the refreshment table. "This must be quite uncomfortable for you."

"Crown Investigator?" His expression gave her to understand he had no idea what she might be insinuating.

She licked a crumb free of her lip varnish. "A party in His Highness's honor. I'm surprised you found it appropriate to attend, given your politics."

"Because a man is loyal to the needs of his own home over the demands of a distant emperor, does not mean that that man doesn't wish the opportunity to discuss matters discreetly and in a mannerly fashion. Or perhaps I'm just here to flirt with the lovely Duchess." Eliot smiled his fishy smile, and Garrett winced as she swallowed the second bite of canapé. Creamy goat cheese tasted like crumbled lard and ash, but she managed with dignity.

"She's lovely enough to warrant it."

Eliot leaned forward. "I had no idea you were so intimate with the Crown."

She let herself laugh; she had practice. "It's my job. To uphold the Crown and the law."

"Even when the Crown is above the law?"

"Parliament would disagree with that contention, Lord Mayor." The Duchess came up beside them at that moment, and Garrett saw Eliot smile thankfully. *Interesting that his hatred for Richard doesn't extend to Richard's wife.* Garrett excused herself, refusing to squirm under Jacqueline's raised eyebrow, and went looking for the Duke through the gentle swirl of music drifting across the floor.

A compact, strong-shouldered man in evening clothes intervened. She studied him without seeming to – as was her habit – as he bowed and handed her a bit of parchment sealed in violet. "Compliments of his Highness." He had an aquiline, pockmarked face and grass-green eyes, strange in mahogany skin but matching the beryl in his cravat-pin. She took the note, imagining the crisp oiliness it would have on her flesh. Gloved fingers brushed hers. "You are as lovely as your reputation, Lady Abigail."

"Please," she said, feeling something – a chain? – shift inside the packet as she touched the corner to her lip. "Abigail Irene. May I know your name, sir?"

The smile rearranged his face under the terrible scars. "Nezahualcoyotl. Michel Nezahualcoyotl. Charmed."

"Aztec! Are you an ambassador from the Emperor?"

"I am." His accent was slight and cultured. "Five years in the court of King Phillip. This has been my first chance to visit my home, however. And my first time in your fair city: very lovely by moonlight."

"I saw it rise," she said. "Gorgeous indeed. Nearly full."

"On the waning side." His smile gentled the correction. "My father's people say the shapes on its face make the outline of a rabbit, but my mother taught me it was an old man. What do your New Amsterdam people see?"

"I'm from London." She changed the subject. "You have very charming eyes. I've never met an Aztec before: I had thought you would have eyes as dark as a Mohawk."

"My mother was white." A trace of coolness in that? "It's why I survived the smallpox, and why I was sent to England when a diplomat was needed."

"It is no doubt to his Highness's eternal benefit that you did." She shook the packet again, lightly, to hear it rustle. "Were there instructions with this?"

"He only asked me to deliver it. My Lady." And he bowed slightly and turned away.

Garrett took a half-step after him, squinting as her skirts belled forward and then settled, swaying, about her hips. She tilted the parchment once more, again felt some weight slide within it. *A note? Something I need to open now? Or is it best kept for home?* She raised her chin to search for Richard and saw him in wary conversation with the Lord Mayor. *And where has Sebastien gotten off to?*

That breeze touched her face again, and she turned to seek its source. Bellied draperies revealed some passageway beyond them, and Garrett chose to investigate.

Rather than a window, the draperies concealed a doorway to a tiny balcony, just large enough for two. It was unoccupied, and Garrett pushed weighty velvet aside and stepped onto pale marble gleaming blue in the moonlight. She drew her right glove off and draped it over her arm before lifting the seal on the packet with her fingernail. Night wind scarfed her skirts and petticoats around her thighs. She tilted the packet and something slid and dropped.

A gold chain fine as a breath of wind fell across her hand. She closed her fingers quickly, before the swinging weight of the

pendant could drag it loose, and raised it to the light. A dark stone shaped like a tear swayed in a shaft of moonlight. "Henry."

There was writing inside the parchment. She slipped the jewel into the cuff of her glove, forgetting to replace the other one, and folded the letter open. *For fondest remembrance*, it said, and was unsigned. A peace offering, then, and not a deeper gesture. A breath she had not known she was holding hissed between her teeth; the perfume of forsythia and daffodils filled her throat, dizzying. She clutched the rail, not knowing if what she felt was grief or gratitude, and didn't notice until she opened her eyes again that her glove had slid down her wrist and dropped over the railing.

"Bother." Garrett tucked the note into her remaining glove, collected her wits, picked up her skirts, and – when another quick glance around the ballroom showed no trace of Sebastien – began her descent into the gardens to retrieve it. She was halfway down the sweeping stairway when she heard the scream.

DCI Garrett was something of an expert on screams. She placed this one as female, aristocratic, and as the discoverer rather than a victim of an atrocity. She turned on the stair, somehow managing her gown, and sprinted back up as fast as she could run.

Cecelia Eliot lay across the striped silk divan in the ladies' lounge with her head pillowed on the scrolled mahogany arm, pale and empty in a way that made Garrett think of a discarded stocking. A torn discarded stocking, ripped from heel to hem...for Eliot's chest was torn open, her throat slashed from ear to ear, and her royal blue gown as spotless and dry as the silk of the couch. Jacqueline stood beside her, trembling, pale hands clutched white-knuckled in front of her mouth.

The little room smelled of cloved oranges, lavender and face powder. Garrett almost gagged. She kicked a vanity bench in front of the door to hold it open and laid her ungloved hand on the Duchess's arm. "Your Grace, come away." Jacqueline looked at her, but Garrett didn't think the woman saw her. "Come away." She heard running footsteps – servants, the Aztec ambassador, the Lord Mayor, and – God bless – the Duke. *Richard!* Garrett stopped her cry just in time, as Sebastien came up the front stairs four at once. Garrett bent her attention to Jacqueline. "Duke Richard. Your Lady needs help." Gently but firmly, she placed Jacqueline into his care and focused on Nezahualcoyotl. "The Mayor," she said, and Nezahualcoyotl turned to intercept the man before he could see his wife in such disarray.

Garrett turned back to the body, crouching beside it. She raised her hands before her as if drawing in a net, but she did not touch. "Don Sebastien." She didn't need to look up to know when he knelt at her side.

"Crown Investigator." Her title now, and his voice rose cool and professional over the sound of a woman's sobbing.

"Detective, what do you notice about the scene?"

She saw the slight smile quirk the corner of his mouth, heard the low resonance of Nezahualcoyotl's voice as he led Peter Eliot away. Jacqueline had recovered herself and was speaking to Richard in a voice that carried soft, urgent command.

The wampyr's gaze swept the bloodless body, the terrible wounds. A thoughtful pause, and then: "Her jewels are gone."

Garrett nodded and waited, knowing there would be more.

"And there are no marks on her arms or hands. Also, the blood is missing –"

Richard's voice interrupted them, as he leaned between their close-bent heads. His words stopped Garrett's heartbeat in her throat. "So is the Prince."



The burgeoning moon had long drifted into slumber, the sun was well-risen and Sebastien had fled the morning hours before, when Abigail Irene, exhausted, managed to return to her townhouse. Her servant Mary snored in the chair by the door, and did not awaken at Garrett's key in the lock. Mary wore yesterday's apron and her wiry coils of hair had frizzed free of her bun. Garrett was reaching out a hand to shake Mary awake when she realized that her dustmop terrier, Mike, was nowhere in evidence. A reflexive check of her wards told her no one had entered the house uninvited, but revealed a presence upstairs.

Garrett's carpetbag lay in the front hall closet beside her umbrella, but her wand was in her boot, and from there quickly in her hand. Without waking Mary, she first checked the lower level and then crept up the stairs to her bedroom door. She was about to turn the smooth, hard doorknob stealthily when the scent of oranges and musk tickled her memory.

She opened the door. Her bedroom drapes were drawn to muffle any sunlight, and Mike came bounding to her from the corner by the fire where she kept two leather-covered chairs. She scooped the patchwork dog up and held him tight to her breast, unmindful of the green silk of her gown. "Your Highness," Garrett said into the darkened room. "We've been tearing the city apart." Henry. *What ever possessed you...*

"I imagined you would think your wampyr awaited you." The tall black-haired Prince came out of the shadows towards her, and she saw that he had slept – if at all – in snatches. The darkness under his eyes lay as hollow and black as that rimming her own.

"I recognized your cologne." She shut the door behind her and threw the bolt. "Henry –"

"I know." He closed the space between them. She turned away and laid her wand on the French-waxed half-round table by the wall, still holding Mike close. The wallpaper in her bedroom had a narrow silver stripe and subtle tracteries of wisteria; she noticed it anew as he spoke. "I vanished. New Amsterdam is in an uproar. I had a reason –"

"Let me see your hands."

"Pardon?"

She set Mike down by her feet. He gamboled around her ankles for a moment, and then went to sniff the gleaming shoes of his long-absent friend the Prince. "Let me see your hands, Henry."

Wordlessly, he held them out to her, and she took them in her own – her left one clad in kidskin, the right one bare. She'd forgotten her glove after all. Henry had bourbon on his breath – not much, a trace, from the decanter on her washstand – and as she examined his manicured nails he leaned close as if to breathe the perfume from her hair. "How have you been, Abby Irene? Really?"

His hands were clean, undamaged. She let them fall. Mike whined by her ankle and Henry crouched to tousle his fur, like brown-and-cream milkweed fluff across those capable fingers. A breeze stirred the draperies and a shaft of morning sunlight glittered on the pirate gemstone in the Prince's ear. "I've been well," she said. She took two steps back and sat down on the edge of her bed, patchwork counterpane dimpling where her hands clenched. "Well enough. I – I like the earring."

"A royal gift from our Aztec friends. Phillip had a fit." Same eyes, same smile. The creases a little deeper.

"Phillip will put up with it unless he gets a son."

A low chuckle trickled out of his mouth. "He will at that. He's

had no luck yet. Fortunately, I have three. The sorcerer-midwife tells Elaine it will be a daughter at last, this time."

"Your wife must be pleased." She made herself stop twisting the counterpane before it tore. "Why did you leave the ball?"

"I was told my life was in danger, and –" He stood, boots silent on her thick, layered carpets as he measured and remeasured a path from bed to wall.

"And."

"– not mine alone, if I stayed. This was the safest place I could think of. I've not been in New Amsterdam before."

It twisted her strings to think he would come to her for protection. After everything. After she had come to America when his mother, the Iron Queen, died and he became heir, when their relationship became a potential embarrassment. She was a Crown Investigator, beholden – only – to the Crown. She had gone to King Phillip without telling Henry.

She had gone without saying goodbye. "Not your danger alone if you left, either."

He stopped mid-stride, turned from his pacing, fixed her on a look. "What do you mean?"

"The Lord Mayor's wife is dead."



Garrett woke Mary and sent her for Richard's carriage, knowing the Duke's men would recognize the Crown Investigator's housekeeper and do as she bid. She put Henry to bed in a guest room – it amused him – to get what rest he could, and cast a minor working over herself to ensure wakefulness. She didn't remember the necklace until she drew hot water and began to undress. When she dropped her one remaining glove on her vanity, a golden chain slipped from the pale kid like a serpent from its den. The stone clinked on marble, and when she picked it up and held it to the light it glittered green, the twin of the one in Henry's ear.

She lifted the long chain over her head and let the stone hang against the crimson sigil between her breasts while she bathed. She was dressed again, decent in a high-necked blue-grey linen gown, by the time Mary returned perched beside the coachman on the bench of Richard's carriage, and with Richard inside.

Garrett waited for the Duke inside her door. "The Prince?" he asked. Before he even had his hat off.

"Asleep," she answered. Richard bent to kiss her and she turned her face away so that his lips brushed her cheek. She gazed up the stairs. "He felt unwell."

"I imagine. And you?"

She shrugged and hung his hat. "Concerned. How is Eliot bearing up?"

"Badly. He insists on the arrest of the Prince."

Garrett swallowed and staggered. Richard caught her arm before she could fall over the hem of her dress. "The – Henry?"

"Yes."

"But –"

Richard lead her to a chair. "There was a similar crime in London six months gone, before the airship departed for Tenochtitlán. The woman killed was – a favorite of his Highness. It's rumored, anyway."

Garrett was pleased that she did not flinch. "What would the Prince want with Cecelia's emeralds, Richard?"

The Duke seated her and released his grip on her arm. Gently, he smoothed a disarrayed blonde strand back from her eyes.

"Misdirection? It's easily explained away. Given the Prince's disappearance just before the murder, when the guests were accounted for and questioned... Telegrams have been sent: Parliament approves the action."

"I am not in the pay of Parliament," Garrett said quietly. "And neither are you, your Grace. What does his Majesty say?"

"His Majesty is silent," Richard replied, bending his head low over hers. "But in the absence of a better suspect..."

"I can offer one, Richard."

Garrett's head turned, as did the Duke's. Henry stood at the foot of the stair, his hair combed and the shadows under his eyes somewhat lightened. "Your Highness!" She hastened to her feet, Richard's hand still resting on her shoulder.

"Sit, Abby Irene," the Prince said kindly, and Garrett heard Richard's breath stop short, felt his fingers clench on her arm. "I can see you are unwell."

She glanced at the Duke but he would not look at her. His forehead was white: she imagined his flesh must feel as cold as if all the blood in his body had run down into his boots. *And now you know, as you've often asked me, why I left London, my love.* She obeyed her prince, and sat. "Another suspect, your Highness?"

Henry nodded and crossed the intricately tiled entryway to stand before them. Richard drew his hand off Garrett's arm. "Forgive me for eavesdropping. I overheard what you said, Richard, about the similarities to the murder in London. I was not even in London at the time: I had the details from a friend."

Richard nodded; his throat worked, but he didn't speak.

Garrett felt a strange tautness in the skin of her face, as if it stretched toward a shout. *No. Henry. No.*

"One of the guests at your ball in New Amsterdam, had both motive and opportunity for the crime. The Spaniard, de Ulloa. It was my contention that the crime in London was the work of an unclean beast...and here we find another such crime and another such creature in close proximity. The coincidence is unnerving."

"Beast? The 'Great Detective'?" Richard glanced down at Garrett, a knife line drawn between his eyes. "DCI?"

She closed her hands on the carved wood of the chair and stood, forcing herself to steadiness. She raised her eyes to the Duke's and made her voice strong. "Sebastien's a wampyr, Richard. That's what his Highness is so gently insinuating." She smiled bloodlessly at the Prince, the jewel burning between her breasts like a star. "I suppose we can place them both in protective custody. Just until we get things sorted out. We'll have to wait until nightfall to collect Sebastien." She pinned Henry with a look. "Your Highness, consider it a gesture to reassure your people that you do not consider yourself above the law."

The Prince opened his mouth, met Garrett's steel-blue gaze, and subsided with a curt, ungracious nod. Henry had always been the smarter of the two royal brothers. Garrett glanced at the Duke: the look Richard gave her was startled admiration, and she kept her gaze on him because she couldn't stand to meet Henry's.



After they had seen to the Prince's comfort – which mostly involved feeding his Highness and seeing him drawn a hot bath – Garrett found herself in the salon with Richard, relaxing on a velvet-covered couch and sipping brandy while his mastiff laid a head that weighed more than a stone upon her foot and sighed. "Did anyone happen to collect my glove from the garden?"

"I'll ask Seamus." He swirled cinnamon-scented liquor in his glass and leaned against the arm of the curved couch they shared. "Will Don Sebastien come if we send a messenger?"

"I don't see why not. He'll need a darkened room for day."

"I can't just lock him in the wine cellar?" But Richard half-smiled and Garrett's startled retort faded.

She let the brandy roll over her tongue, savoring an almost creamy texture. "Where's Jacqueline?"

"The Duchess –" Richard frowned. "Spent the night at her brother's. I expect she'll be home after dinner. The Lord Mayor, I am told, has taken to his bed." Richard's opinion was plain in his voice. "You never told me you had an affair with the Prince."

"I never told the Prince I had an affair with you. When you have Sebastien in your clutches, my Lord, will you see to it that the house burns down and be rid of them both?"

"If only I could get away with it." But he smiled. "Can you link the criminal to the crime? If we have them both in the house, can you eliminate them as suspects through sorcery?"

"I can try," she said. "It depends whether the assassin kept the device used to commit the murder far away from himself until it was needed, and then discarded it, or if he kept it close. Perhaps if we can discover what became of the poor woman's blood..." She shook her head. "It wasn't Sebastien, Richard. For one thing, he came up the stairs behind me, and if he had gone down so close in advance I would have seen him."

"He could have leapt from a balcony. If he's what you say?"

"He could. But –"

"A wampyr wouldn't kill, if the mood took him?"

"That's prejudice, Richard, and utterly unfair. Or is it just jealousy?"

"I..." He reached down and smoothed the dog's velvet ears. Sipped his drink. Fiddled with a stick-pin she hadn't seen before. "Yes," he said sharply. "Would you rather I didn't care?"

Something wild flared in her breast. "Sebastien," she said with utter clarity, "doesn't need to *take*."

Her words seemed to hang between them for an hour. Richard stared into the depths of his glass, and spoke very slowly, as if he had not heard her at all. "We have to – Abby Irene. We have to prove the Prince's innocence. If there is any doubt. Any *shade* of doubt –" He left the thought unfinished. *The Lord Mayor will turn it into another article in his endless list of reasons the Colonies must secede from the Empire, and throw ourselves on the mercy of the silk-fisted French. Not just neglect, taxation, King Phillip's desire to build his Empire eastward. Not just neglect, but malevolence.*

She stood and finished her drink, gently extricating her foot from under the dog. "Send the message to Sebastien now: his servants will see that he gets it. Send another servant for a scrap of Cecelia Eliot's dress. I'll need it tonight. When I check on the Prince. Or the prisoner, if you prefer."

"As you wish," Richard said, his foot flipping restlessly. He set his own glass aside, fingers lingering on the mouth-blown glass. She shivered in an almost-physical recollection. "You should rest beforehand, Abby Irene."

"Where is Mr Nezahualcoyotl sleeping?"

"The ambassador? He's got rooms on the fourth floor. In the East Wing, near the Prince's suite."

"I need to speak to his Highness before I rest: I need some items from him. I'll take the south guest bedroom, after. The green one." Down the hall from Richard's room, connected by a side door to the third-floor library. A pair of three-hundred-year-old elms

screened the windows. Richard cocked his head at an angle and arched his eyebrow at her – a silent question.

Garrett forced one narrow smile before she left.



Richard left her before teatime, brushing her emerald necklace aside to plant a final, lingering kiss on her sorcerer's tattoo. Garrett stretched against the velvet coverlet on the canopied bed and closed her eyes just for a moment as the door to the library closed behind him. When she opened them again, the sky blazed crimson through sheer cream lace curtains, and she swore; she had wanted to speak to Henry before Sebastien arrived. She rose and dressed quickly, wincing as she yanked a comb through unfashionably short hair, and turned back just as she was leaving to snatch up her dark velvet sorcerer's carpetbag and the envelope with the scrap of blue dress in it. She took the servant's stair because it was faster and scandalized a chambermaid in the process, but arrived at Henry's suite before the red sun dipped under the horizon. She knocked, and the Prince in his dressing gown opened the carved wooden door so quickly he must have been waiting.

She had thought that Richard's touch fresh on her skin would make it easier. She looked into Henry's smile and cursed herself for a fool. *You're too old for lovesick, Abby Irene.* Same refrain. It never helped. "Ready for the spell, your Highness?"

"Of course."

He shut the door behind her and locked it, came to her and laced his fingers through her hair tight enough to hurt when she stepped away. Almost as much as stepping away from the warm smell of musk and lemon peel that surrounded him hurt. She did it anyway. "Henry."

"I adored you," he said.

"It's not beyond Phillip to have you killed if you become an embarrassment, you know."

"Is that treason, Lady Abigail Irene?"

"It's fact," she said coldly. She turned up a gaslamp and lit a candle from her bag: an old one, translucent wax lumpy with bits of shattered quartz and pungent with rosemary needles. She set it on the cherrywood dresser and looked up at him. "Did you get what I asked for, your Highness?"

Wordlessly, he handed her a snippet of thick white linen. She recognized it: a bit of the hem of the shirt he had worn to the ball. She drew a silver spoon and an ordinary nail-scissors from her carpetbag and clipped a corner of the blue dress fabric, rested both in the spoon, and held it over the candleflame.

"Don't you need to cast a circle?"

"The smoke must move freely," she answered. She looked up at him; the rising moon cast a copper light through the eastern window, a little less full than the night before. It touched Henry's cheek with color as it had Sebastien's. "Let's watch."

Garrett knew the smoke would rise in two distinct streams, parted by still, unbreakable air, and drift about the room aimlessly as a bored kitten. The inverse principle of similarity would make the two smokes irreconcilable, unless the natures of the two fabrics – manufactured half a world apart – had been fused into a single whole by some act of unimaginable violence.

The streams rose pure and red-lit by the rising moon, conjoined as if they were one thing.

As they were. Garrett dropped the spoon into the candle, snuffing the flame. She snapped a glance over her shoulder at

Henry, but the Prince simply watched her, a frown drawing the corners of his mouth down. "What have you done?" she whispered.

"Nothing," he said, waving a hand to disperse the stream of smoke that coiled around his throat like a noose. "This is some trick. Nothing. Tell me you believe me: have I ever lied to you?"

She shook her head and blew the smoke away. "You never have," she said, and when the pooled wax had hardened, she swept her tools into her bag. "You should dress for dinner, your Highness. We'll have guests."



The tension at the long table all but soured the meat and wine, glittered off the silver and crystal like the gaslight from the chandeliers. Sebastien had arrived with a wry smile on his face and a fresh rose in his buttonhole fifteen minutes before service. He sat on Garrett's left and flaked his fish aimlessly across his plate with a heavy silver fork. She drew a great and secret amusement from watching the cleverness with which he pretended to dine: he'd very nearly fooled her, when they met.

The wampyr caught her looking and presented her with the thin edge of a smile. He swirled his wine in the glass, and touched it to his lips, inhaling the aroma. Garrett found she didn't have much appetite either, sitting among guarded men with Michel Nezahualcoyotl making polite forays into conversation.

Sebastien had scarcely set the glass down when the Aztec ambassador leaned forward. "What brings you to the Americas, Don Sebastien? You are Spanish, of course –" Nezahualcoyotl left the thought unfinished. The British alliance with the Aztec Empire dated from a time when both great powers found themselves with a common enemy: the then even greater power of Spain. "– I would have thought you'd go to the great trade city of San Diego, if you wished to explore the New World."

"San Diego is lovely," Sebastien said, laying his fork aside and letting his left eye drift closed in a smiling wink. "But I prefer a cooler climate for my exile."

"No one comes to America for the climate," Garrett watched Richard's face as she said it. He smiled faintly: he'd been born in New Amsterdam, made his fortune by twenty-one in the service of the Iron Queen, and married the old Duke's daughter and heir so he could protect the city and the colony he cherished.

"Some come to New Amsterdam to escape the consequences of previous actions," Henry commented without looking up from his food. "But I think most come out of – well, I won't call it cowardice. Perhaps it would be better to say, a desire to start anew. I suspect most of those merely wind up making the same mistakes over again. A *man* faces up to his errors, after all, and fixes what he can."

Garrett felt the pressure of Henry's eyes on her, his anger and his desire, and smelled again the smoke of scorching cloth. The anger she thought she should feel paled under white scorn at his cruelty, and her unease at the messages in the smoke. *You broke his heart, Abby Irene. And he is angry. But what reason would he have to kill Cecelia? It only hurts the Crown. Now, if it were the Lord Mayor... Perhaps this was an attempt to frame Sebastien?* She saw Sebastien formulating a rejoinder, more incensed on her behalf than his own, and interceded casually. "It's a better exile than some."

"There are many sorts of exile," Nezahualcoyotl said. The Aztec seemed to eat with good appetite. "It's hard, being kept from your home." A self-deprecating smile touched the corners of his strange light eyes, and then he glanced at Henry. "But not too

onerous; one finds good friends wherever one travels – ”

The sound of footsteps in the hall silenced him. Richard half-stood from his chair, moving to place his body between the Prince and the door. Garrett pushed her chair back, a half-step behind Sebastien – who moved like oil on water when he wanted to – and slipped her silver-tipped ebony wand from her pocket as she came up beside the Duke.

She relaxed only incrementally when she realized that the figures framed in the archway were the blonde, reserved Duchess and the widowed Lord Mayor. *Are they having an affair?* she wondered – but they stood an unmeasured distance apart, and no awareness flowed between their bodies. *No.*

Could Eliot be behind the murder? He wouldn't be the first husband to sorcerously do away with his wife. And she knew he'd hired a black mage not twelve months earlier to weaken Richard's political position and to try to kill Garrett herself, although Garrett had been unable to prove it.

"My lord husband," Jacqueline began. She stepped into the dining room, gaslight glittering on her earrings and playing over the fine silk of her dress. "I happened upon the Lord Mayor in the drive as he was arriving. Shall we invite him to dine?" Her eyes measured Garrett for a coffin as she spoke.

"The offer is kind," Eliot interjected before Richard could answer. "But I won't sit at table with a killer. I suppose you've made no progress in your investigations, Detective Crown Investigator?"

His expression shook Garrett's cool assessment of the man as a bastard: there was something like pleading in his eyes. Richard stepped halfway in front of her, and she bit back a snarl, but Sebastien laid a steadying hand on her elbow and moved aside, drawing her from behind the Duke's fair-haired bulk. "The *Crown Investigator*," Richard said, "is making every effort to bring the case to a speedy resolution."

"Richard," Jacqueline began. He tried to silence her with a glare: she raised her chin and stepped forward. "It is his *wife*."

"I'll bet," Eliot said simultaneously, stepping past Jacqueline and striding forward to confront Richard nose to nose. "In *loyal* service to the Crown."

Garrett heard the scrape of a chair as Henry stood. She didn't look. "That's sedition," Richard said softly.

"It's fact," Eliot turned his head and spat. "Arrest the Prince, Richard. Prove once and for all you care for something other than your Ducal seat. That you care for the colonies, and for New Amsterdam." He turned his head and stared Garrett in the face. "DCI. Do you know who killed my wife?"

Richard moved to put himself between them again. He walked into Sebastien, who had coolly set himself for the block. Garrett pushed forward and laid her hand on the Lord Mayor's arm. She looked over his shoulder, caught a complex expression on the Duchess' face. "When I have conclusive evidence – " *You have conclusive evidence, Abigail Irene.* " – Lord Peter, you will know what I know."

He stared her in the eye for a long, sharp-edged second before he turned and strode away.



Garrett wasn't quite certain how Sebastien spirited her away from the dining room. She remembered his hand on her arm, quick footsteps and the eventual pause, breathless, under a rising moon that painted the gravel garden path under their feet in knifelike shadows. "Don

Sebastien, I am in your debt again," Garrett said, leaning into the shadows of a towering forsythia, fighting crawling shivers.

"I think we're past the point of friendship where we need to keep accounts," he replied. "Was Richard always such a pig?"

She laughed, winding her arms around her body. "He's jealous. And a patriot: he sets no loyalty before the Crown. I think he sees that you are not jealous, and to him it seems another bit of evidence that you are heartless and cold."

"I learned that it was foolish to try to possess things," Sebastien shrugged and put his arm around her, for all he had no warmth to share. "Or women. What sort of a life could I offer?" A thoughtful pause. "Is it Prince Henry, Abby Irene? I cannot deduce another answer, and I cannot understand why he would do such a thing."

She leaned back against his shoulder and watched the rising moon dye the facade of the Duke's manor the color of skimmed milk. She shook her head, her hair moving against his jacket, the rose in his lapel brushing her ear. "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships/And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?"

"You realize, if they had listened to the women, Troy would still be standing? Helen tried to warn them, and Cassandra too."

"After she was cursed for spurning Apollo. And yet she and Helen take the blame." The scent of the forsythia hung over them, raw and sweet, less flower than vegetable. The moon rose another finger's width, waning from full, shaped like a sail bellying in the rising wind. "Don't the years grow long alone, Sebastien?"

"Look." He pointed. "You can see the rabbit in the moon."

"Did you bring me a bit of the shirt you wore last night?"

"I did," he answered, and held her strong hand in his cold one as they walked with measured paces back inside. "I'll ask Duchess Jacqueline if I may have the room beside yours, if that suits you. I somehow don't think she'll mind."



Smoke rose by smoke, two streams plainly divided in the dappled moonlight that made its way through the branches of those ancient elms. Garrett closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall beside the locked door to the library, breathing a sigh. *Exactly as it should be.*

The wampyr was innocent. She laid the silver spoon in an ashtray and snuffed the candle out with licked fingertips just a moment before a light tap rattled her door. The hall door: she had been prepared to ignore a furtive tap on the other, having little patience for Richard tonight. If he was fool enough to come to her under the same roof as his wife.

Garrett padded to the door barefoot and slid the bolt back, letting the door drift open on well-oiled hinges. She was unsurprised that Henry stood revealed beyond. "I apologize," he said as he brushed by her, taking the door from her hand and swinging it silently closed. She noticed with annoyance that he turned the key in the lock. "I was boorish at dinner. I don't know what possessed me, and I hope – " he paused. "I hope you can forgive me."

Garrett stepped to the side, and began putting the tools of her sorcery away. "No apology is needed. Thank you for the necklace, Henry. It's lovely."

"Necklace?" His voice was tight and heavy as if he wept. The floor creaked behind her.

Garrett whirled, carpet burning the naked ball of her foot, and ducked to grab for the wand in her open bag. Not fast enough. His hands – those strong, tapered fingers – reached for her throat, lengthening as she watched, strange hollow-pointed claws curving

from the nailbeds in a welter of puckered flesh.

Garrett shouted at the top of her lungs. Henry's eyes shone blankly glossy, glazed by the moonlight. Talons pricked her skin and she heard – as if through cotton wool – the sound of someone pounding on the heavy, ancient door. She drew a breath to scream but – alien, dagger-tipped, not the hands she remembered so well – his hands closed on her throat and he pressed her back against the bureau still littered with her instruments of sorcery.

Garrett reached out right-handed and tore the emerald out of his ear.

Henry jerked away with a cry, blood racing over suddenly human hands as he clapped them to ripped flesh.

One more resonant thump: the lockplate shattered with a splintering crash. Sebastien and Richard burst through the door. They halted at the spectre of blood and moonlight, at Garrett tearing her gown open and ripping the emerald necklace from her throat as Henry swayed and went to his knees.

"Richard, your stickpin!" She pointed at his collar, and he flung the jewelry away like a serpent discovered in a pocket.

"Abby Irene –" Sebastien started.

"It's the ambassador," she said. Henry looked up at her, the sanguinary flow still staining his hands and his shoulder. Sebastien turned, Richard half a step behind him.

"No."

A voice accustomed to obedience, and both men froze in the

doorway as Henry forced himself to his feet. A slow drip ebbed down his jacket. He didn't seem to notice. "I'll handle this."

Garrett supported herself against the dresser. Sebastien and the Duke stepped aside, but turned to follow as the Prince pushed through the shattered door and stomped out of sight.

Silence ensued for some minutes, and Garrett found the strength to go and seat herself on the bed. She wondered when a servant would be along or worse, Duchess Jacqueline. Some time later, Sebastien stepped in from the hallway and reported: "He kicked the door in."

"Oh."

Henry followed no more than ninety seconds later, Richard at his side. He held something clenched in his fist like a shed snakeskin, and he held it out to Garrett like a man offering his best hound the fox's tail. "Your glove, my lady?"

Garrett took the limp, bloodstained thing and dropped it on the floor between them. "He needed a binding. The emeralds to limit it, to bind you and identify the target. Some personal item to trigger. He must have done the same in London."

"I left before the killing –"

"Did you?"

"I..." Henry pushed bloodstained fingers through his hair. "Yes. I don't remember. But how could I not remember?" His arm dropped to his side as if his own touch disgusted him.

Garrett moved away from the dresser, into the center of the



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room. "He said his mother was white."

"French," Prince Henry answered. "A concubine to the Aztec Emperor. She died of the same pox that scarred him as a boy. When the Aztec court came to England, when we were both boys." The Prince had too much courage to turn away. "I taught him English. We were – friends."

"The Emperor found uses for him, I take it. But they didn't suit his ambitions?"

"Or maybe his taste for revenge." Richard shrugged.

"Bastards and second sons –" irony dripped from Henry's tongue – "make good ambassadors."

"We can't let anyone know he used you for his scheme, Highness. You've no guilt in this thing." The Duke coughed into his hand. Garrett studied Richard's face, and Henry's. And the wampyr's, though Sebastien stood silent by the door.

Henry swallowed and looked down at his hands. "I can't...lie about this, Richard."

"You're asking him to conceal evidence of a murder." Garrett was surprised at her own voice, level and disbelieving.

"It could mean the revolt of the colonies if you don't. The end of our alliance with the Aztecs: this is the Emperor's bastard son. Everything the French could have wanted."

Henry looked at Garrett, his deep-set eyes glistening, stricken in the bluing moonlight. Garrett looked away. She knew what he wanted her to say. She touched her throat, felt the torn edges of

her dress. "I serve the Crown," she whispered.

She pushed away from the dresser, stepped past Henry, past Richard, toward the door. She stopped. Glanced over her shoulder.

"I have to confess this," Henry said, drawing himself up.

A harsh scent of burned cloth and blood tainted the air, overwhelming the scent of oranges.

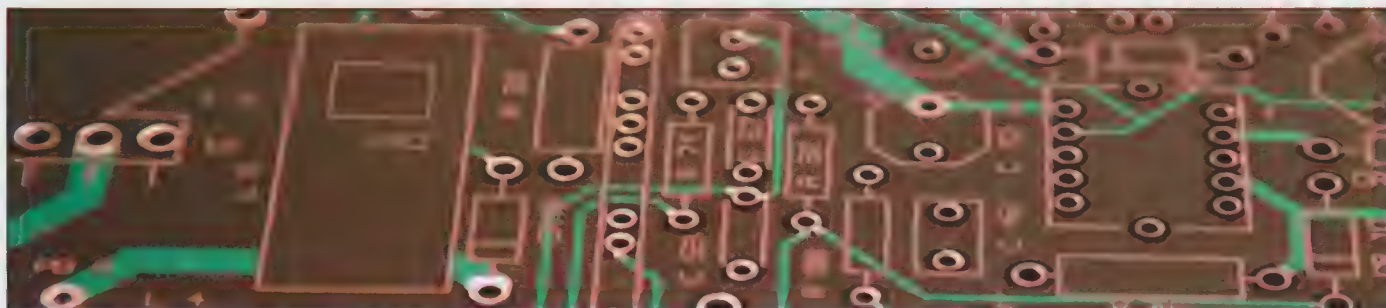
"It will mean lives if you do, your Highness." She didn't need to look at Henry to know how his lips pursed in struggle, didn't need to look at Richard to see him drop his eyes to the floor. "Mine, perhaps. The Duke's. Maybe even your own. It will mean war. And it will mean only your honor if you don't."

"I know." His hands flexed helplessly, stretched and clenched. "What would you have me do, Abby Irene? What will *you* say of all this?"

"I will do as my King bids me do," she said. And then she stood and watched the moonlight move upon the wall, and waited for them to argue. Don Sebastien never moved from his place beside the door.

"Sebastien," she said into their silence. "Sebastien, take me home."

Elizabeth Bear was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. She is the author of several science fiction and fantasy novels and the recipient of the 2005 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and she lives in the other England, the 'new' one.



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The *Lord of the Rings* changed Hollywood in a lot of ways for which it's hard to feel entirely grateful. It made three-hour bum-crushers commercially thinkable, a full generation after the death of the intermissioned epic. It made Saul Zaentz the principal beneficiary of the Tolkien estate. It reawakened the Salkind finesse in sequel management, under which you shoot multiple films back-to-back for year-apart release to build momentum, and spend the year fiddling with the later instalments in post-production once you've seen how the first one goes down. But most of all, it achieved the unimaginable by showing the industry how it could be even greedier, setting an unattainable beacon of franchise management and merchandising that only the *Potter* films are positioned to match. Since the last of the *Rings* disappeared down the Cracks of Doom, the sense of a seasonal product vacuum has been palpable; and this past season's two biggest releases, which happen also to be the year's most extravagant follies, owe their existence directly to the dawning of the Fourth Age.

If anyone had forgotten just how much of the White Witch's confectionery has to be swallowed to make these massive events happen, Disney's *Narnia* was launched with the full force of a Hollywood merchandising firestorm to make even the most ardent Jackite blench, even without the indignity of an Alanis Morissette theme song. This is, after all, the highest-stakes cinema project since New Line bankrolled Jackson. If live-action debutant Andrew Adamson and his team can spin the numbers right, a franchise is born of *Potteresque* proportions that will make the *Rings* look like a quota quickie. But will anyone be able to keep a straight face through lines like "I'm such a bad Faun"?

It's easy enough to see why some children, and many adults, are simply immune to the Narnia bug. Indeed, Tolkien's own inability to get past Lewis's slapdash worldbuilding and speedwritten production remains the most penetrating diagnosis of the series' essential weakness. (By the time *LW&W* hit the shelves, Lewis had already knocked out three and a half sequels in the space of a year.) On the other hand, it's hard to have much sympathy for those so allergic to the George MacDonald stuff that the very whiff of Anglican protreptic brings them out in hives. Hollywood narrative forms are so saturated in thumping Christian allegory – redemption, denial of death, messianism, apocalypse – that it's if anything rather refreshing to see it engage with a narrative that uses these tropes with a sense that they might actually have value as something more than a cheap source of culturally-invested storytelling fallbacks. As a novelist, Lewis



was at his most interesting, imaginative, and adventurous precisely – perhaps only – when working with the one mythology that deeply engaged him, and the most powerful things in the *Narnia* books are consistently the most overtly Christian sequences: the sacrifice in *Lion*, the end of *Dawn Treader*, the apocalypse in *Last Battle*.

As it's turned out, **The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe** is reverential, conservative, cautious, tracking the book a good deal more closely than the later *Rings* films respect Tolkien. There's the inevitable prologue tacked on to show the Pevensies' blitz experience and Edmund's father anxiety (alas) before being evacuated on a Hogwarts Express through heritage countryside, and the children's gung-ho enthusiasm for preindustrial warfare has been toned down to the point where Susan's bow shoots precisely one arrow in the whole film. But the main scenes are there in the right order; replotting has been staunchly resisted, in the face of considerable provocation; and a surprising amount of the cod-Nesbit voice and dialogue, including the faun line, has been preserved intact. On the whole, it does a remarkable job within the limits of the material, which has more than its share of millstones – the talking beavers, Father Christmas, the screamingly camp Mr Tumnus – and Aslan's sacrifice scene generated audible blubbing at several points in the auditorium. But those whose infant hearts were untouched by the light of Narnia are bound to reflect that, when you see it on screen, a lamppost among trees just looks like Hampstead Heath, which probably explains why Mr Tumnus is cruising there, and why you can only get there by slipping out the back of the closet.

« It's easy enough to see why some children, and many adults, are simply immune to the Narnia bug »



MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

At least Peter Jackson's own **King Kong** is a complete one-off, a film that for better or worse is entirely a product of its irreproducible circumstances of making. So lucrative is Jackson's extraordinary deal on this project, and so long-term its prospects of making back anyone else's investment, that the whole thing is likely to have a healthily apotropaic effect on the industry. Rather, *Kong* 2005 is a vehicle to lure the man who is now officially the world's most bankable director back one more time to the hugely complex spectacle cinema he's otherwise disavowed, and nobody can say he doesn't earn his twenty million plus points on the gross.

Kong is a reimagining of an unmade film, the stillborn remake Jackson was developing in the mid-nineties as a japesy action adventure, before cooling studio feet and the preemptive arrival of *Mighty Joe Young* liberated him for more interesting projects. The Jackson/Walsh 1996 draft script was a kind of *Romancing the Stone* in *Jurassic Park*, reconceiving Jack Driscoll as a former WWI teen aviator and Anne Darrow as an English archaeologist in a coupling that looks for all the world to have inspired the Brendan Fraser

and Rachel Weisz characters in Stephen Sommers' *Mummy* script a year or two later; and one of the key challenges has been to find a recoverable film in this now badly-dated pre-*Rings* project. What Jackson, Walsh, and now Walsh's *Rings* co-writer Philippa Boyens have come up with for the 2005 version is a kind of \$300 million extended DVD commentary on the 1933 version, preserving the second half of the 1996 script fairly closely while remodelling the first half on Schoedsack & Cooper's original tone, structure, and sequence. It largely resists any significant retooling of plot, apart from some liberal recharacterisation of the central roles: a new and softer Jack Driscoll as a Broadway intellectual; an Anne with a background in vaudeville. Instead, the doubled running time has been eked out with extended dramatic sequences and post-*Rings* set pieces.

As entertainment, much of this is tremendous; the Empire State Building sequence is white-knuckle stuff, the most spectacular use of vertigo yet seen on screen, and Kong himself is extremely impressive. The plot is tosh, but largely gets away with it by presenting itself as less a film *an sich*

than a meditation on a cinematic myth; and though the sheer relentlessness of the dinosaur set pieces gets rather exhausting at times, the hours pass fairly pleasantly, with a good half-dozen sequences that even a fairly grudging Jacksonian would have to concede are pretty gobsmacking *tours de force*. With the partial exception of Naomi Watts' Anne, none of the live cast set the screen alight, and Jack Black's Denham is a particular weak spot: lazily conceived, perversely cast, and stiffly performed, though toned down from the still more caricatured 1996 version (who got stomped on and squashed in the theatre sequence, and not before time). For a film that's so centrally about filmmaking on both literal and metaphorical levels, it's a pity that Jackson can't find more to respond to in the complex, ambivalently heroic director-as-white-hunter of the 1933 version; and a revealing comment on the *Rings* experience that he projects himself instead on to the figure of Kong.

« As entertainment, much of this is tremendous »





Back in the northern hemisphere, the quest for new ways to create audiences from the corpses of dead films continues with its usual enthusiasm; and as the complexities of franchising evolve, even the old marketing language of 'sequels' and 'from the makers of' break down, with new rhetorics having to be minted to take their place. In a combination of ingenuity with a certain desperation, Jon Favreau's *Zathura: A Space Adventure* is billed as 'From The World Of *Jumanji*'. I tried this one out on the younglings: "Do you want to come to a screening of *Zathura*? It's From The World Of *Jumanji*." Blank looks. "It's a film loosely based on the book that was a sequel to the book on which the film on which the TV series was loosely based was loosely based. No connection to the film, except it's the exact same plot only with outer space instead of the jungle." No takers; I lost them at "It's." Unlike *Jumanji*, it does at least keep the brother leads from the Chris van Allsburg picture story, though their parents have been split up and mom whisked offscreen to be a distant provider of generalised familial tension; and it quite rightly recognises that the book's central image of the family house as spaceship is one of the most powerful and primitive fantasies in the preteen imagination. But all this gets fairly quickly pulled into a rather different orbit.

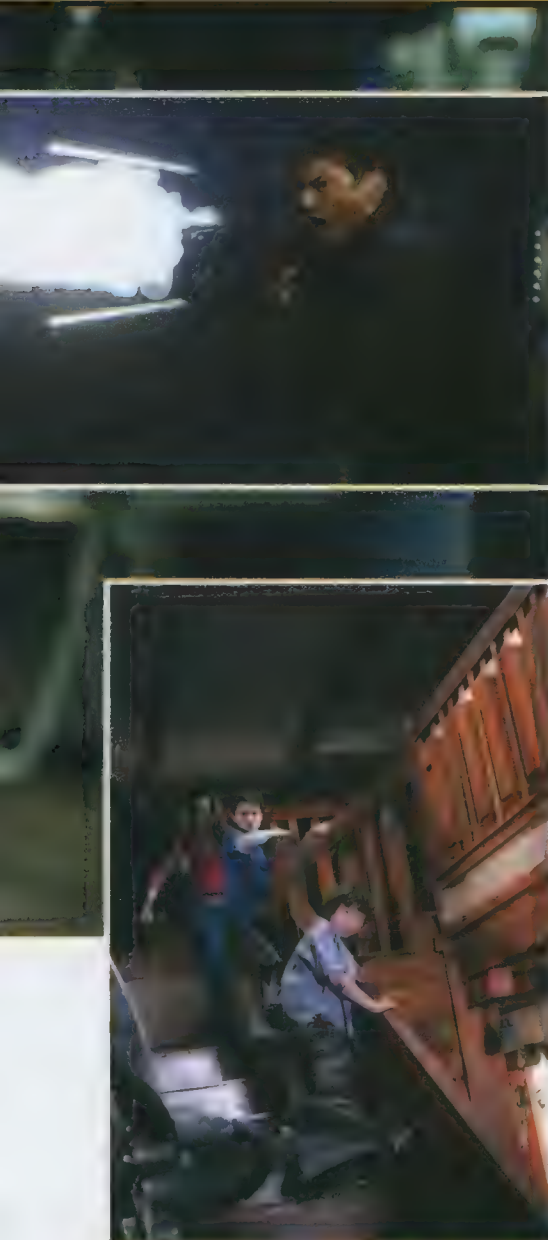
The script, from industry favourite David Koepp, is a strange and on its own terms quite bold creation, bringing a new level of

mechanisation to its plot by pushing even further than *Jumanji* the trapped-in-a-boardgame premise. Ten years on, board games seem more than ever a heritage medium by comparison with their more immersive and experiential digital counterparts; and to compensate, the traditional framework of rolling dice, moving counters, and turning up cards has been cinematically spiced up by making *Zathura* a highly-collectible tin-toy case version with clockwork action and painted moving parts. But this only emphasises the essentially mechanical nature of the story. Two players take turns winding a key and pressing a button, whereupon the plot will (i) move the pieces forward in the direction of the ending and (ii) dispense a card announcing the next set piece or arbitrary plot surprise: 'enlist new cast member out of nowhere'; 'put supporting character into suspended animation for next ten plot beats'; and so on. Just as in *Jumanji*, the game would be over in no time if they just got on with it, so that actual moves in the game are spaced out with long stretches of what a sympathetic observer might call 'character business'.

But here lies the trouble. Audaciously for a family sequel, the characters are all fairly repellent, and the able and professional juvenile cast have spared no effort to make their characters as unappealing as they're written. Veteran kid star Josh Hutcherson, last encountered as the voice of Markl in

Howl's Moving Castle, turns in an impressively petulant, ghastly, and bullying big brother from hell, while *Panic Room*'s Kristen Stewart makes the script's vestigial and thankless caricature of a teenage big sister every bit as tiresome as intended. Even the notional hero, little Danny the dreamer, is a whiny cheat; while Tim Robbins as the dad has to cope with a painfully parentally-correct script that requires him to stop, wince, and apologise any time he utters a remotely sharp or interesting line. Throughout, the brothers scream and bicker authentically, with some impressively realistic yelling contests that push the envelope of comfortable family viewing.

And in one key respect, the solicited comparison with *Jumanji* does it no favours at all. Where *Jumanji* had a strong female centre in Kirsten Dunst's character, *Zathura* reverts to a crude and shocking androcentrism that wrests the material into a knuckle-dragging meditation on fatherhood, brotherhood, sonhood, and any other kind of hood that treats females as contemptible, disposable, and unworthy of the effort of understanding even as enemies. Mother is written out of the picture, unseen and unloved; while the one female character on screen, the annoying teenage sister, is literally frozen out of the action for most of the running-time, and simply forgotten for a large stretch of the rest, at no point allowed either sympathy or heroism beyond a single throwaway moment



« The quest for new ways to create audiences from the corpses of dead films continues with its usual enthusiasm »

when she drops a piano on an alien (from offscreen). And when, at the end, like the Cat in the Hat riding in on his super-duper cleaner-upper, the comprehensively trashed house is reset to the condition in which your parents would wish to find it, all that remains to suggest to dad that anything has happened is an unnatural desire on the part of his sons to play harmlessly and helpfully with one another while he gets on with something in the office. A broken family film for our times, *Zathura* is most effective as a stark warning against parental divorce, and for that matter against boys. It's likely to make for a fairly uncomfortable outing for separatees to take the kids to on a dad weekend.

The notionally adult counterpart to *Zathura* would have to be *Doom*, latest and least in a generally dismal line of game franchises that want to go viral by transferring their commercial DNA to film. It opens with the words "In the year 2026 archaeologists working in the Nevada desert discovered a portal to an ancient city on Mars," which at least makes it clear that this is not a film that messes about; and indeed within minutes, without wasting time over establishing anything so unmanly as characters, Dwayne the Rock has his team of Village People marines off on 100 minutes of the most boilerplate game-movie plotting ever seen. For this is one of those shoot-'em-up-and-pick-'em-off missions through a lot of dark corridors by gunlight with game hints coming through on an earpiece and first-person shooter cinematography, all driven by lines like "We have to stop anything from getting to the surface, by any means necessary" and "We are the reinforcements." The best that can be said for this Europudding by numbers is that (i) it has the same plot as *Serenity* and (ii) it boosts respect for the work of Paul W.S. Anderson – of whom I seem to be the one living fan, and even *I* found *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* fairly hard going. Apart from the upper half of Dexter Fletcher, nothing in *Doom* is as good as Anderson's worst. It would be comforting to think there weren't going to be any more of these, but somehow the more go down the more there seem to be. Maybe on the next level.



At least nobody could accuse *Just Like Heaven* of reckless masculinity, as Reese Witherspoon's eerily spot-on personation of Hospital Doctor Barbie goes *BLAM* in a car crash thanks to a triple offence of driving when tired, phoning at the wheel, and fiddling with her radio when she ought to be watching the road, and ends up haunting her unbelievably prime Pacific Heights apartment where dream male Mark Ruffalo happens to be the new tenant. Some *mysterious force* seems to be throwing them together in a succession of cute situations; but how can they have a life together when one of them is dead? In this American transplant of French literary heartthrob Marc Levy's big white chocolate manon of a first novel, the *Beetlejuice* scenario is fairly swiftly revealed as a decoy in what is really, beneath the fluffiness, a fairly virulently anti-science, anti-feminist melodrama about plug-pulling in terminal care, whose lesson is that uppity rationalist lady doctors who are too successful to find a man will change their tune when they find themselves in a persistent vegetative state, and serve them jolly well right. Though some of the decidedly Gallic plot logic here is the novel's fault, it deserves better than this crude Hollywood de-nuancing with its comedy possession routines and disambiguated feelgood ending. San Francisco has never looked prettier, and Witherspoon plays to her strengths; but if the elusive chick audience is out there at all, it's unlikely to come flocking to this. Narniologists will remember the ultimate fate of Susan Pevensie, *Left Behind* because she chose nylons and lipstick and invitations over dying rapturously in train wrecks. You may not agree, but it's a choice you can respect.

Nausicaä of the Valley Of The Wind

director Hayao Miyazaki • 1984, 116 mins, £14.99 • PG

Long before Miyazaki was wowing international audiences with – in my opinion – the overrated *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle*, he was making *phenomenal* anime. *Nausicaä* is his first movie, and is adapted from his own manga masterpiece of the same name.

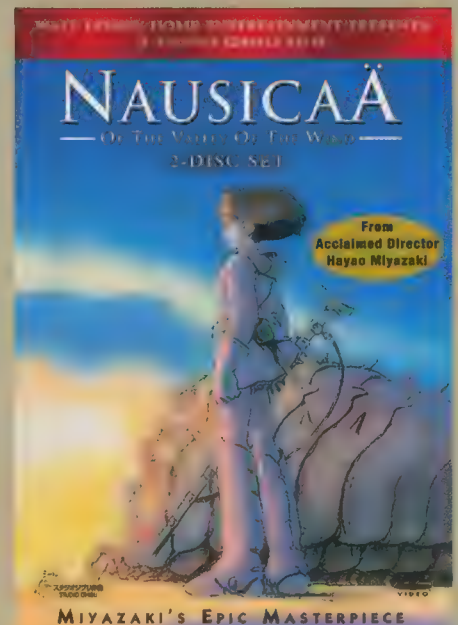
Thousands of years ago, humanity engaged in a war so deadly that it ruined the planet, leaving most of it covered in a spreading, poisonous forest of enormous fungi inhabited by giant insects. The few humans surviving the war have colonised what little inhabitable space there is, and are now struggling to preserve their homelands in the face of the expanding forest and neighbouring countries desperate for more space and resources.

Nausicaä is the princess of a tiny agrarian country, the Valley Of The Wind. Her peaceful life is shattered when an invasion

force from the much larger Torumekian Empire decides that the Valley Of The Wind would make a good base of operations. The Torumekians land, killing Nausicaä's father and taking her hostage to ensure her people's co-operation. They plan to burn the forest and reclaim the world for humanity. Nausicaä knows that the crusade is doomed to failure, as the insect inhabitants of the forest will fight back, destroying the Torumekians and anyone helping them, but her arguments go unheard. Nausicaä has to escape her captors and somehow soothe the savage beasts of the forest before her kingdom is destroyed.

Nausicaä is by far Miyazaki's best movie. His environmentalism is firmly at the fore, political intrigues interweave with the more action-based main storyline, and none of the characters are villains: although there are some evil actions, they are done out of a sense of right. The plot is complex and intelligent; and Miyazaki's designs and animation are a pure joy to watch.

A must see for any sf fan.

**ON DVD ANIME by MICHAEL BUNNING**

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INFOZONE COMING SOON

Also See The Top 5 Gunbuster

director Hideaki Anno • 1988, 6x30 mins, £17.99 • PG

It's The Future, and in anime, that means big robots. Nowadays, it means big robots and *Ghost in the Shell* style pseudo-philosophy, but in 1988, The Future meant big robots and melodrama. Melodrama by the bucketload!

Sixteen-year-old Noriko Takaya has enrolled in Earth's Space Academy Programme, where she'll learn to pilot mecha and join humanity's space defence force. She's trying to live up to the legacy of her father, Admiral Yuzo Takaya, whose fleet of starships was destroyed by an unknown alien race. Unfortunately, she lacks any sort of aptitude for the job, being unable to pilot even the simplified RX-71 training mecha properly.

Against the odds (but handily for the plot), she's chosen for an advanced training programme in deep space, and has to cope with jealousy and bullying from the unlucky students, while at the same time attending a

regular school and also attempting to master the RX-71 before she leaves for space.

From this starting premise, the series builds quickly to the obvious revelation that Noriko is chosen to pilot Earth's superweapon mecha, the titular *Gunbuster*, before taking several more interesting turns that change the show from a fairly dated super robot homage into a surprisingly engaging miniseries, which culminates in a genuinely shocking and yet heartwarming final episode.

The animation is well executed and nicely detailed (though very 1980s); as is the soundtrack. The melodrama isn't overplayed (well, not much), and there's exploration of themes of responsibility, guilt, ethics, love, loss and more. And it's all wrapped up in fairly accurate scientific concepts, dealing with time dilation, Minowski space-time, Doppler effects, Lorentz transforms and so on, explained in mini 'science lessons' after each episode.

An absolute classic, which needs to be watched by all sf fans, even if they think they don't like anime.

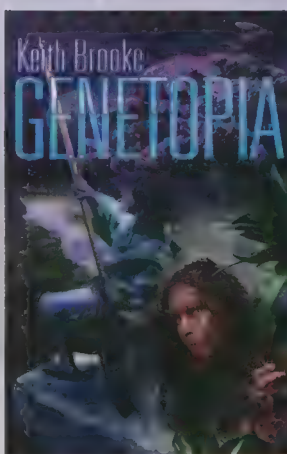


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GENETOPIA

Keith Brooke

305 pp • ISBN1-59102-333-5
Hardcover • \$25 • February 2006

"British author Brooke's engrossing far-future parable intertwines old, old human questions: Who am I? Where am I? Where am I going? Must I go?...In this impressively conceived, poignantly drawn object lesson in the implacability of mutability, Brooke (Lord of Stone) posits one constant: that only change is eternal."

—Publishers Weekly starred review

"Keith Brooke's prose achieves a rare honesty and clarity, his characters always real people, his situations intriguing and often moving."

—Jeff VanderMeer

"If you're looking for great, well-written new science fiction novels by writers you have a reason to trust, then Brooke is now your man. Or at least, he will be when the world gets a chance to crack Brooke's world of Genetopia...a combination of excellent prose and really, really weird adventures in a carefully conceived environment...a gripping exploration."

—Agony Column advance review

The story of Flint, a young man in search of his abducted sister in a far future where nano- and biotechnology have influenced and accelerated the evolution of humans and their strangely altered surroundings.



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CELL

Stephen King • Hodder, 398pp, £17.99 hb

Because he has so often written large books about one thing at a time it is necessary to be very afraid of, Stephen King has always seemed a perfect child of the Nuclear Age, a period in the twentieth century when it seemed to be a very good idea to be afraid of one thing at a time, o tempus o mores. Where is the one single thing of yesteryear? At the very end of the twentieth century, King was of course almost killed by a truck which ran him down on a deserted road; and slowed down for a bit (the truck driver later committed suicide). For a year or so – at least as far as one could believe announcements from a man who had suffered grave psychological and physical stress, neither of which was ever really going to leave him for good – it looked as though he were about to stop entirely, after finishing the Dark Tower sequence, which had been mutating slowly into a vast Edifice of Story within whose runes and veins could be seen the face of the author himself, a very nice man, haunted and terminal. But not for long. The writer who was writing about stopping has stopped writing about stopping and started simply writing again. I say thank you. Here is *Cell*.

We are now well into the new century, and so would *Cell* be with all its heart, even though, in the end, it has thoroughly resolved itself into a medium-large book about one thing at one time. *Cell* is competent, rather funny, deeply depressing, horrific, swift off the mark and pretty damned hard to stop reading before the closing slingshot that leaves us listening for a tone; it is also (I think maybe quite deliberately) belated. Technothriller-style, the exact day things go wrong is given (it is 1 October), but not the year. But the stock market is standing at 10,140, which is just about us (today, as I write, at the end of January 2006, after a few goodish months, it stands at 10,865). So we are well past nine-eleven, and the world – even for Americans – might seem no longer like one shock of recognition, but a thousand tiny seismic thuds of liquefaction, as landfill turns to jelly within us. But King will have none of this. Bam.

It is mid afternoon, and millions of human beings are on their cellphones. Suddenly the protagonist, Clay Riddell, who is a Maine artist away down in Boston to sign a graphic novel deal, notices that people are beginning suddenly to act very strangely. They begin to groan out terrible meaningless syllables. They attack one another with their teeth. They kill each other, they wander aimlessly about. At this stage they are indiscriminate: they chew

each other up, and they kill the unaffected as well. It soon becomes clear to the protagonist, and the little band of normals who accrete around him, that what has happened is that only those who were on cellphones were driven inhumanly mad; and that some kind of cellphone Pulse had (as it were) stripped their hard drives, unleashing them. As Konrad Lorenz says in a famous passage (which King quotes as an epigraph to the novel), "Humans have not evolved any ritualized aggression-inhibiting mechanism to ensure the survival of the species. For this reason man is considered a very dangerous animal."

The rest of *Cell* follows King-wisely from its incipit. Clay and his cohort undergo savage experiences in their attempts to survive the baring of most of the human race to unselfed chaos. Clay has an unassuageable need to return to his family in Maine, though he knows rationally that almost certainly they have been turned into Phoners (there are hints here, luckily unfounded, that King has bought into an obsessional trope common to almost every American action film except those starring Clint Eastwood, who usually

rides his horse on out of there after being Christ for a bit: this is the Redeeming of Dad trope, according to whose diktat all protagonists who are Dads faced with the end of the world or what *must* discover and/or rescue and then get back into a good relationship with his son, mothers can tag along if they don't nag). This need of Clay's is so clearly not a survival trait that even the gay man and the geek boy who have come to love him do, in the end, separate from him. But so, in a sense, does King. Unless there is a sequel in view, I think (and pray) that the slingshot that closes the book means that Clay's son (yes, yes, Clay does find him) is truly a goner.

Nonsense, perhaps. The Pulse is never explained, though the geek boy's supposition that whatever had happened – and whatever was beginning to happen to the Phoners as they began to flock like birds and forage for scraps in abandoned Malls – increasingly showed the programme-disintegrating signs of a worm in the works. But the Pulse itself (it is this which slithers *Cell* into fairly pure Horror rather than Horror SF, which it has seemed to be verging upon for most of its



length) is without agency.

Nonsense, perhaps: in 2006, the episteme insists that no one thing is going to happen to us: that everything is going to. But *Cell* does imaginatively convince at the point of telling, for almost all of its length. Over and above the quite extraordinary storytelling skills of the author, I think maybe this is because King has inhabited *Cell* with a large number of people who have clearly half-expected something like the Pulse to come along precisely because almost all of them have had their expectations of the world shaped precisely by Stephen King. He is far too savvy and modest a writer to make anything like this explicit, but his cast's constant referencing of a very wide variety of King-like tales and films and urban legends does the necessary job of making it clear that, in 2005, any cast of Americans is going to be living through any events that resemble a Stephen King novel with the half-consciousness that they are, in fact, living in a Stephen King novel. *Cell* is a Twice-Told. Just like any Twice-Told fairy tale that replumbs the veins of the race, *Cell* is an echo of the undying dream.

The Cosmology of the Wider World

Jeffrey Ford • PS Publishing, 173pp, £25 hb or £10 pb

Also Twice-Told are most Beast Fables, which echo Aesop and any night-time glimpse into a mirror which may tell you something about the skin that covers you so convincingly in daylight. The twentieth century was particularly rich in them: Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Books* (1894–1895), which jumped the gun a little; most famously Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945); Donald Harington's *The Cockroaches of Stay More* (1989) and Scott Bradfield's *Animal Planet* (1995), to cite two examples out of many late-century depositions. So Jeffrey Ford's *The Cosmology of the Wider World*, whose hero is a Minotaur, is a tale embedded in a deep traditional mode of telling exemplary fables about our condition. It is also something new; it is also, I think a Posthumous Fantasy.

In a Twice-Told rendering of the story of Pasiphae, whom an angered Poseidon drives mad with lust for a bull her husband (King Minos) had refused to sacrifice to the god. She enlists the aid of Daedalus – the great artificer, more central to the heartroot of speculative literature than Thomas Alva Edison – who designs for her a hollow wooden cow, into which she climbs, presenting herself doggy-fashion to the deluded bull, who mounts her. The child from this union is the Minotaur. In *Wider World*, his name is Belius. The world

he is born into resembles ours. He is a freak. But in adolescence he discovers to his shock that he can converse with other species than ours. One of his closer relatives, a cow named Austina tells him that he's

a monster for sure. There is enough human in you to murder and still enough bull in you to understand the language of your victim.

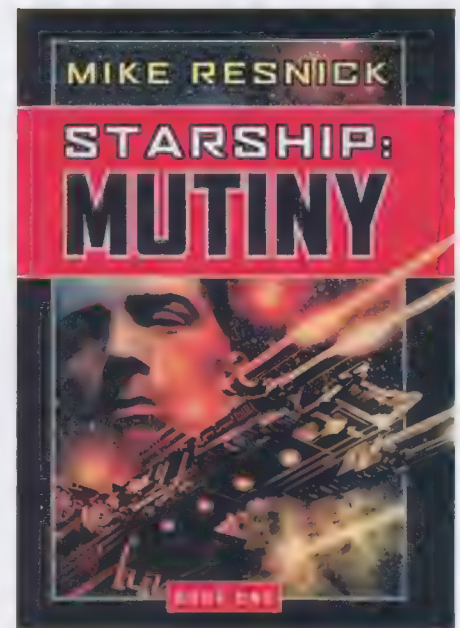
Belius is soon taken over by the doctor who presided over his birth. He learns to read. He dresses like a man. He falls in love. His love is reciprocated. It all ends in tears, as we knew it must.

But the actual storyline of *Wider World* is double. In the first storyline we encounter, we meet Belius in the Wider World, under “a yellow sky that fizzed like quinine,” where he and other creatures out of the traditional Beast Fable – a Mole, a Tortoise, an Owl, and so on: all of them, unlike Belius, “normal” animals who talk – meet and converse and, together, try to cure the monster of his black dog nights. The second storyline – the tale of his life on Earth – we soon understand to be a flashback. Belius has at some point managed to gain access to the Big Rock Candy Mountain Wider World, where passions and discourse play and interact polymorphically, as though carbonated free of our mortal coil. Belius's friends think he needs a mate, and fabricate one out of quasi-magical ingredients. What happens to her and Belius ends the novel; but the back and forward shape of the double story – with all the melancholy cross-stitchings that Ford's seemingly amiable slow paced style make so subtly apparent – do give off a sense of immurement. We know we are in the grips of a story, and we know that the cost of achieving the Wider World must have been high. Eventually, as this perfectly light, perfectly dark novella reaches its climax, we learn that Belius can only find the Wider World by running through the forest towards the light until his heart breaks asunder within him.

Starship: Mutiny

Mike Resnick • Pyr, 286pp, \$25.00 hb

Mike Resnick, who bestrides the world of populist sf like a bull with lots to tell us, has begun to publish a new quintet of books set in his Birthright Universe, the extremely loose-slung galaxy-wide future history frame, extending over millions of years, in which he has set most of his fiction for the last several decades. Unfortunately the first volume of the new subsequence, *Starship: Mutiny*, is no place to start. Though it is not labelled a juvenile, it is clearly written for a lowest-common denominator Young Adult market, for readers who would be shocked at the

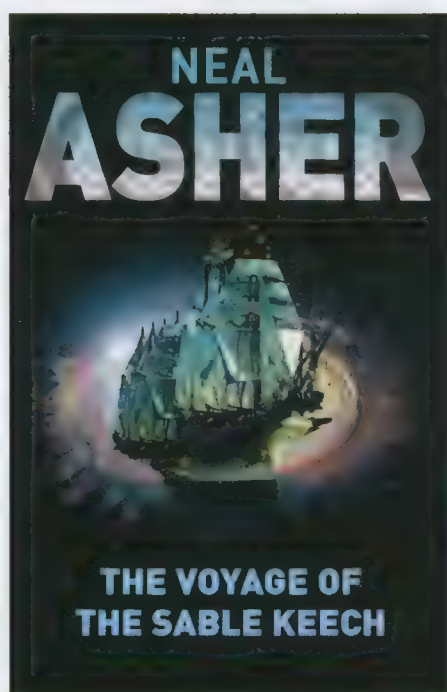


The cover art of *Starship: Mutiny* is by World Fantasy Award winner John Picardo, who has also made the cover art for *Interzone* issue 254.

complex modernities and taboo violations of Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959). In other words, Resnick, not an unmodern uncomplex figure of a bestriding bull, is talking down to us. And it hurts.

The protagonist is a rebellious but *always* right maverick who scorns stiff-kneed military hierarchies and “rigid, by the book officers.” He is sent to an obsolete warship named the *Teddy Roosevelt* – in an afterword Resnick tells us that Roosevelt was not only one of the most interesting Americans who ever lived (spot on) but “the most remarkable of all Americans” (which gilds the lily till it sinks) – where, over the course of three disconnected episodes straight out of Keith Laumer and the Lads, he demonstrates his extraordinary rightness in all things, and the terribly sclerosis of the galaxy-wide society he is purporting to defend.

It may be Resnick's ultimate point that indeed that society is reached sell-by; but in the context of this loosely conceived and carelessly written sketch (minor plot inconsistencies blot the tale at randomish intervals), there is no way of knowing Resnick's intentions, or whether he is serious about a jot or tittle of the thing. The babytalk archaicism of the space-opera world he has conceived – we will not address at length the implications inherent in the stone-age gear his military sorts are lumbered with – do lead one to think he's not really given his Donal Graeme manque hero, or the military oafs this really pretty offensive smart-ass hornswaggles, a single serious thought. So we won't, either.



The Voyage of The Sable Keech

Neal Asher • Tor, 506pp, £17.99 hb

Asher builds on past successes by developing the politics of his Polity universe, and taking readers back to the lethal sea-life of the planet Spatterjay. And though much of this book relates to events in *The Skinner*, it works just as well if you don't have a great deal of prior knowledge.

What's most striking about *The Voyage of The Sable Keech* is its sense of supreme story-telling confidence, and its willingness to play creatively with previously-introduced characters, events, and world-building rules. The second definite article of the title, 'the' Sable Keech, shows us the game that Asher is playing: a character encountered in *The Skinner* is, here, mythologised by a cult of resurrection-seeking zombies who then name their ship in Keech's honour. These 'reifications' – or walking corpses – aim to recreate the journey across Spatterjay's oceans that Sable Keech himself followed, one which resulted in his own resurrection.

This novel therefore takes the 'reality' of previous narrative events and converts them into the basis for a group's religious fanaticism. Readers who have followed Asher's work will especially appreciate this book's playful distance from what has come before, although new readers are still clearly filled in on the doublings of *The Voyage of The Sable Keech*, coming to understand how

Keech's exploits have been mythologised and appropriated by a band of reifications.

As it turns out, Asher has bigger fish to fry in this marine-monster novel, and so the quest narrative of the ship, the Sable Keech, runs alongside a number of other plot threads. A villainous and enslaving race known as the Prador are also ably represented here through a character called Vrell, left alive at the end of *The Skinner*. Again, Asher takes what readers think they already now, and twists it sharply, because much like Sable Keech's mythologisation, the Vrell we encounter here has also been subjected to a number of distorting transformations.

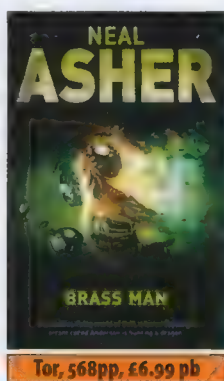
As well as distilled narrative energy, another of Asher's strengths lies in his world-creation, and in his detailed imagining of a demented ecology. But via the figure of Vrell, as well as through the religious icon of Keech, Asher creates far more than just a series of memorable monsters. *The Voyage of The Sable Keech* reveals what monsters themselves fear and desire as monstrous: it shows the awe which can emerge around category-violating creatures failing to fit with the established rules and patterns of Spatterjay's species.

Asher's narrative world never stands still. Its rules are set up, reiterated, and then broken in ways which will no doubt resonate in future works. This restlessness

« If ever you needed evidence of sheer narrative verve and confidence, and of an author stretching out and having fun, this 'whelk' sub-plot would have to be it. It works, it really does »

– this ceaseless natural progression and disruption – is further symbolised through the inclusion of an extended subplot about a giant whelk. Inevitably, this partly pastiches hoary 'giant tentacled sea monster' adventures, but it simultaneously adds to the novel's sense that even within strange and alien environments, creatures and associated cultural categories can change in remarkable ways. If ever you needed evidence of sheer narrative verve and confidence, and of an author stretching out and having fun, this 'whelk' sub-plot would have to be it. It works, it really does.

The Voyage of The Sable Keech is a thrilling page-turner, but it's also an unsettling reinvention of an already monstrous world, a treatise on the metaphysics of self-identity, and a hell of a lot of fun. Neal Asher doesn't need marketing and publicity to be recognised as a "first-tier" SF writer: books as creatively charged as this one speak for themselves.



Tor, 568pp, £6.99 pb

When under the hood, the book is a novel in the tradition of *The Skinner*.

Life and death in all its forms is explored, often messily, but also in speculations about whether recording a mind is a continuation of that mind's life, my own particular slant on resurrection, the possible ennui of immortality. Also included are the themes of crime and punishment, transformation (very much so), and the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious mind. But of course, that all sounds too worthy and meaningful for a Neal Asher book, and my first aim was to give the reader a damned good time.

What was the most surprising thing in the book?

Letting my imagination run riot throughout the first two thirds of the book. Writing about the weird life forms and the ecology of Spatterjay.

What was the most surprising thing in the book?

Tidying up the first two thirds of the book, chopping out the proliferation of plot-threads and characters, and finally tying off all those plot-threads. Also refraining from taking the easy option at the end.

How would you describe the book's history as a work of science fiction?

It wasn't so difficult with this book as with the Cormac books, since the back-history mainly exists in *The Skinner*, with only some references to the time Cormac occupied (some 200 years before). But using 'search' on the computer is very useful. The devil is in the details: what is the colour of Prador blood, and what precisely happened to Sable Keech prior to his resurrection?

What was the most surprising thing in the book?

It has to be Whelkus Titanicus – a nightmare for all those shellfish stall holders in British seaside towns.



BOOK REVIEWED BY MATT HILLS • AUTHOR PROBED BY SANDY AUDEN

Picking Up

Alastair Reynolds • Gollancz, 457pp, £14.99 hb

It is easy to write hard science fiction badly. The number of tropes is limited, and so long as you put them in something like the right order you'll please a portion of your audience at least. But it is very difficult to write hard science fiction well, to make that limited number of tropes seem fresh and exciting all over again.

Alastair Reynolds's new novel is an excellent example of how it should be done. If you are so inclined you can tick off all the familiar devices: we have been here before. The cast is composed of a hardened crew of asteroid miners. The plot is kick-started by the unexpected discovery of something alien, in this case a moon of Saturn suddenly leaves orbit and flies off towards a distant star system. There's the chase during which our crew is exposed to incremental perils, so that their very survival is down to human ingenuity in the most unforgiving of environments. There's the eventual alien contact which pitches our crew, just when they were beginning to breathe easy, into the middle of alien conflict. And finally there is the big dumb object whose scale and significance are at best only dimly perceived. All of this is familiar fare, and there is any number of hard sf hacks who could cobble those contents into a competent adventure.

Reynolds plays the same old tune, but plays it well. There are the sudden shifts in perspective that make us gasp, the new technologies so convincingly described that we are sure that laboratories are busy perfecting them even now, the hair's-breadth escapes and reversals of fortune and bitter deaths that keep any reader turning the pages. But the reason this novel stands out is that Reynolds makes the old tune sound fresh: could we be hearing it for the first time? Any author who tries to inject characters into the vast landscapes and stunning machinery of hard sf is onto a loser, but Reynolds makes it work. With broad brush strokes he gives us a series of flawed humans trying to do their best but driven by conflicting beliefs and incompletely grasped motives. We believe in these people, and despite the scale of the technology we never lose sight of their humanity. And there are mysteries throughout the book that aren't always solved in the expected manner (and sometimes they aren't solved). The characteristics of space-time mean that one way of looking at this story is that it covers several thousand years and untold light-years, yet the scale is always comprehensible, the hard sf does not drown out the adventure story.

Paul Kincaid



Visions and Re-Visions: (Re)constructing Science Fiction

Robert M. Philmus • Liverpool University Press, 411pp, £50.00 hb

The parentheses in the subtitle give the game away. This is a trick that postmodern critics have developed to suggest multiple readings of what is being discussed. It is a valid tool, but one that Philmus abuses; there are pages here where there seem to be nearly as many parentheses as there are words, and some uses – the repeated formulation 'a(n)other', for example, where decisive use of 'a' or 'another' would not send the argument in noticeably different directions – seem at best petty.

The trouble is that Philmus seems to be using excessive postmodern techniques

to advance an argument that is positively medieval. The scholastics of the middle ages saw perfection in a golden age of antiquity, and believed that all a new writer could do would produce a pale copy at best. Philmus appears to have a similarly monolithic view of science fiction. The title, from T.S. Eliot, (and the pun is another over-familiar postmodern

technique) promises visions and revisions, but the book has little room for vision. We come away believing that all science fiction is echoes or reaction against something that has gone before (he talks variously of pretext and pre-text). Every science fiction writer begins their career by responding to his or her predecessors, then spends the rest of their career effectively rewriting their first books.

To an extent, this is trivial. The idea that science fiction is an ongoing conversation has been common currency to my knowledge

since the 1970s at least. To the extent that it is non trivial, that science fiction is defined by and best understood by re-visioning, I remain unconvinced. By focusing solely on the notion of science fiction as 're-vision' one loses sight of all the other things it might be, as literature, as satire, as thought experiment, whatever. Science fiction is many, not one, and our view of the literature needs to accommodate its varieties at least as much as its similarities.

But I could be wrong. I use 'seems' a lot in this review because this book (actually a collection of essays published between 1972 and 1998, but extensively rewritten to form one argument) is not written for clarity. It is not the extensive use of technical language, anyone familiar with academic criticism will be able to make their way slowly through this; but a fondness for words like 'vehiculate' when far plainer alternatives are readily available and generally preferable has an obscuring effect. (And if academic nicety rather than pretentiousness dictates that a passing reference to *War and Peace* should be to its Russian title (though not in Cyrillic), why does a similar nicety not give *Tristram Shandy* its proper title: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*?) Nor does the structure of the book help: a sequence of chapters that takes us from Wells to Lem, Capek, Stapledon, Lewis, Vonnegut, Borges, Calvino, Le Guin and Dick follows no readily apparent pattern, not even chronological. And reserving his theoretical position for the Afterword rather than laying it out at the beginning does little to clarify things either.

Paul Kincaid

New and notable books received ♦ **Black Juice** by Margo Lanagan (Gollancz, 227pp, £8.99 hb).

Genre-bending YA story collection. This UK edition features a new, previously unpublished story. Out now ♦ **Visionary in Residence** by Bruce Sterling (Thunder's Mouth, 294pp, \$15.95 pb). A collection of thirteen stories. Out in April ♦ **Parallel Worlds** by Michio Kaku (Penguin, 428pp, £8.99 pb). The science of alternative universes and our future in the cosmos. Out now

♦ **The Ghost Brigades** by John Scalzi (Tor, 320pp, \$23.95 hb). The sequel to *Old Man's War*, reviewed in a previous issue. Out now ♦ **Genetopia** by Keith Brooke (Pyr, 305pp, \$25 hb). The UK author's first novel (excluding the YA titles written as Nick Gifford) since *Lord of Stone* in 1997. Out now ♦ **The Blade Itself** by Joe Abercrombie (Orion, 545pp, £16.99 hb/£9.99 tpb). Debut fantasy novel, first in a series called *The First Law*. Out in May ♦ **Elemental: The Tsunami**

Relief Anthology edited by Steven Savile & Alethea Kontis (Tor, 380pp, \$13.95 hb). Introduction by Arthur C. Clarke, original stories by Brian Aldiss, Adam Roberts, Jacqueline Carey, Larry Niven and others. Out in May ♦ **The Clan Corporate** by Charles Stross (Tor, 320pp, \$24.95 hb). The third book in the fantasy series *The Merchant Princes*. Out in May ♦ **Nietzsche's Kisses** by Lance Olsen (FC2, 244pp, \$15.95 pb). The story of Nietzsche's 'last mad night on earth' by the author of *Tonguing the Zeitgeist* and others. Out now ♦ **The Plot to Save Socrates** by Paul Levinson (Tor, 271pp, \$25.95 hb). 'Time travelers are out to save the greatest mind in human history for the future.' Out now ♦ **The Devil You Know** by Mike Carey (Orbit, 384pp, £6.99 pb). Supernatural thriller, debut novel from *Hellblazer* and *Lucifer* comics writer. Out in April ♦ **Engaging the Enemy** by Elizabeth Moon (Del Rey, 402pp, \$25.95 hb). Third in the military science fiction series featuring Kylara Vatta. Out now ♦ **A mention here does not preclude a full review**

Temeraire

Naomi Novik • *Voyager*, 336pp, £12.99 hb

Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* is a gloriously unabashed swashbuckler, mixing sword fights, dragons and British military history with an infectious enthusiasm. Set during the height of the Napoleonic wars, the novel's sense of period is precise, the nineteenth-century 'voice' of the characters and narration is impeccable...and the addition of dragons to genuine historical events like the battle of Trafalgar proves to be an inspired choice.

Will Laurence is a naval captain from an aristocratic family, looking forward to a career of successful advancement within the Navy and a marriage within his proper family circle. All of his plans are overturned when his ship captures a French vessel carrying a dragon's egg. Once hatched, the dragon – most inconveniently – chooses Laurence to be his rider. That choice sweeps Laurence away from his orderly life path to a disreputable

adventure in the wilds of Scotland, during which his life, his plans and his deepest desires will be entirely transformed.

This novel has been widely publicised as a cross between Patrick O'Brian and Susanna Clarke. In some ways that is a fair comparison, but it also does *Temeraire* a slight disservice. While it shares the field of witty historical fantasy with *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, and it begins with a naval scene that could easily fit into Patrick O'Brien's Jack Aubrey series, it quickly moves into territory all its own. Fast-paced, tightly plotted and high-spirited, it makes a history complete with dragons feel like the authentic past.

Laurence himself is an endearing and worthy narrator, but his dragon – Temeraire – is the undoubted star of the book, unique, intelligent and loyal, without so much as a hint of the twee sometimes associated with literary dragons. As the adventure unfolds, you'll find yourself rooting for both of them to succeed against the odds. I'll eagerly await the second book in this trilogy.

Stephanie Burgis

K-Machines

Damien Broderick • *Thunder's Mouth*, 320pp, \$14.95 pb

The second book in Broderick's *Players* in the *Contest of Worlds* series, *K-Machines* takes up immediately from where the previous episode *Godplayers* left off. August Seebeck, a medical student from Melbourne, has discovered that he and his newly found siblings are *Players* in the *Contest of Worlds*. They travel from one computational reality to another, locked in a centuries old battle with the titular K-machines. August knows precious little about these mysterious entities, and even less about the conflict in which he finds himself.

One thing is clear to August: he had better discover the rules of the game quickly if he is to stand any chance of saving the multiverse. August sets out to track down his brothers and sisters, but his progress is frustrating. His siblings are too caught up in their own roles in the game to be of much help to him. It soon becomes obvious that August is going to have to figure things out for himself. He starts to wonder whether he is a player in the game or a pawn moved by the hands of the gods.

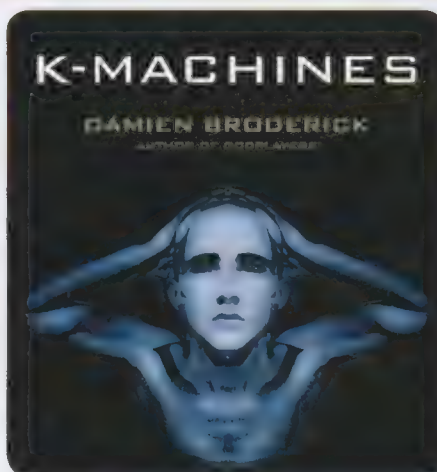
Broderick's aim in the two novels that comprise the series is to explore the impact of what he refers to as technological singularity. What will happen when computational power reaches the pinnacle whereby simulational universes can be created, peopled by conscious entities? What status will the creators of such realities hold?

K-Machines literally teems with ideas, musings and deliberations on almost every aspect of modern life. Everything from tarot

to kabbala, popular culture to philosophy is thrown into the mix, as the author leaps acrobatically from one intellectual arena to the next. Broderick's handling of the subject matter is, as expected, masterful. The prose is colourful and well crafted, elegantly detailed and at times poetic. *K-Machines* is as much fun as its predecessor, with Broderick's sense of humour both earthy and erudite.

As with *Godplayers*, the action does to some extent become lost between the layers of ontological soul searching. It becomes overly transparent that the trials and tribulations of August are merely a vehicle for the central theme. This subtracts somewhat from any dramatic tension the reader may be feeling, although not fatally so. Ultimately, *K-Machines* is a satisfying, thought-provoking and enjoyable book. Most importantly, it reminds us what science fiction is for. And that's got to be good.

Peter Loftus



Bridge of Souls

Fiona McIntosh • *Orbit*, 674pp, £7.99 pb

What a blast of a series this is! Fiona McIntosh's *Quickening* trilogy has been a non-stop breathtaking romp from start to finish, and *Bridge of Souls* concludes all the adventure, grisly deaths and megalomaniacal machinations in gleeful style.

In volume one, *Myrren's Gift*, Legionnaire Wyl Thirsk's kindness to a condemned witch is repaid with a magical gift – in the event of his death, Wyl can swap bodies with his murderer. Wyl's position in the Legion leads to his involvement in affairs of State, and too close to some secrets his monarch, Celimus, would rather he didn't know about. When Celimus has Wyl killed, Wyl finds himself living and travelling in the body of his own assassin and falls in love with Princess Valentyna of the neighbouring Kingdom. But King Celimus covets Valentyna's country and under threat of war, proposes marriage to unite their countries.

In the ensuing events Wyl proceeds to get murdered several times, as he and his friends struggle to stop the war, expose the evil Celimus and free Valentyna from an abusive marriage. In *Bridge of Souls*, Wyl is coming to terms with being a woman, the mercenary Aremys has been imprisoned by the Mountain King, evil wizard Rashlyn is generating more chaos in his search for power, and servant boy Fynch has to deal with a deadly challenge.

Body-hopping personalities are not new in fiction – Stephen Gallagher's excellent *Valley of Lights* is an obvious example – but McIntosh uses the mechanism sparsely. She surrounds it with an involved story about a whole host of interesting characters and the fates of three kingdoms. The characters actually drive the plot, and body-swapping Wyl adds spice by becoming an unpredictable complication for everyone.

These complications generate significant amounts of plot, and the sheer volume of story distinguishes this book from its blander rivals. Events arrive rapidly and constantly, and you're swept easily from one encounter to the next. There's considerable misinformation going on, and McIntosh shows no fear when it comes to hacking people brutally out of the story.

It's not a perfect trilogy – there's too much repetition in places and the plot twists occasionally feel too contrived – but it is breathlessly entertaining and oodles of fun.

Sandy Auden

«*Bridge of Souls* concludes all the adventure, grisly deaths and megalomaniacal machinations in gleeful style »

The Stormcaller**Tom Lloyd • Gollancz, 488pp, £77.99 hb**

Tom Lloyd's debut novel is the start of a trilogy which is very much in the epic vein. It is a vivid world, written from obvious passion for the genre and with an attention to the major problem: how to bring retold tales alive for a new audience?

Isak is a white eye, a feared aberration of nature who has a fierce temper. He longs to leave his village, where he is despised by his father as well as the population. When his wish is granted, he finds himself caught in a godgame: he is to be the next in line to the Overlord, Lord Bahl.

Lord Bahl is also a white eye but is in need of finding somebody whom he can trust to rule his empire. Coming from the village to the court, Isak is plunged into the maelstrom of politics which he quickly learns is as dangerous as the battlefield. As the human court begins to break up in the intrigue of its constituents, the land is under siege from the elves who are bent on returning to the world. They believe that the last king is about to be reborn and they need to retake their rightful place.

Plunged into fighting for the empire, Isak finds himself being moulded in the heat of combat. As he does so, he awakens the last dragon who is keeper of the last king's relics. As the prophecy unfolds, all those involved with the prophecy discover that its interpretation differs and that its fulfilment may be somewhat different from individual to individual.

Lloyd echoes writers such as Moorcock and Gemmell in the creation of the white eyes but he carves his own version of the universal champions, giving them inner lives and problems rather than assuming that all is well in their own psyches. The court intrigues will be familiar to readers of Tad Williams or G.R.R. Martin, as will the detailed world building. Rather than being lost in these large feet, Lloyd creates a vivid world which gradually comes alive and promises more for the future volumes. My only regret was that this book ended rather suddenly.

Iain Emsley

« Lloyd echoes writers such as Moorcock and Gemmell in the creation of the white eyes but he carves his own version of the universal champions »

▲ DEBUT NOVELS ▼

Resonance**Chris Dolley • Baen, 400pp, \$24.00 hb**

Enter the world of Graham Smith, office messenger and aloof obsessive-compulsive. His life consists of ritual and repetition; his circumscribed behaviour anchors him as firmly as possible to a reality that has always seemed disturbingly fluid and mutable. Throughout his life, people have disappeared from the world, not in the normal way that people come and go, but in a way so complete that they seem to have never existed at all. He has memories of losing his father not once but twice. Sometimes he wakes to find himself in a house he doesn't recognise, or one he hasn't lived in for years. He has learned to make notes for himself to help him regain his place in the world each time this happens – a selection of post-its reminding him where he lives, where he works and so on. He is utterly convinced that the world is only kept from unravelling completely by his meticulous attention to his day-to-day schedules.

Then one day he meets a girl from America who has wild theories about what is happening to him. Then she disappears

in another world-shift. And then he meets another version of the same girl, who has another set of theories again. From here on in, Smith is pulled into a baffling series of events in a number of realities as he and others try to discover what is happening and what has caused it. Is he a lab rat in a virtual reality experiment? Or perhaps involved in some bizarre alien conspiracy? As the plot unfolds, it turns out things are even stranger and more complicated than they initially seem.

Chris Dolley's *Resonance* has a bold plot that relies on mystery for its impetus. Straight away the reader is asking the same questions that Smith is continually asking himself. The POV rarely shifts away from Smith, however, and this means that the constant barrage of internal questioning that he goes through can become a little tedious. It can also be tricky to work out which reality the plotline has shifted to. The story has a 'science fiction lite' flavour to it; Dolley focuses on the characters and dialogue, leaving the technological aspects in the background. Don't expect bells-and-whistles 'hard SF' stylings, but instead trace Smith's progress towards unravelling the personal mystery of his weird existence. An original debut, if not necessarily in keeping with current writing styles.

Paul Raven

read with relish by the members of the group. There are no super-heroics here, nor fiendish plots to destroy the world, and no impossibly sexy girls appear to throw themselves adoringly at the students. The only mechas are the lovingly constructed plastic models from Madaramé's favoured anime 'Mobile Suits T-Gangaru' (a thinly-disguised reference to the *Gundam* series). This is not to imply that *Genshiken* is merely a work of social observation, a wry comment on a significant phenomenon in contemporary Japanese life. Such is Shimoku's skill that the reader comes to understand and sympathize with the insecurities and dilemmas of these obsessive fanboys for whom coming up with a well-timed and apt quotation from *Gundam* is the height of cool. His attractive and fluent style of drawing helps to bring the characters to life; there is humour here, but it is gently and piquantly done. When Sasahara at last buys his long-coveted PC, he tells Madaramé, "I wanna taste the 'true pleasures of porn' right now!" So Madaramé suggests "Pretty Menma the Ramen Angel." Sasahara settles down alone, with fast-beating heart...but after an hour has passed, he begins to realize that Madaramé has tricked him. "However Sasahara had become completely absorbed in the game. The comically cynical characters created a surprisingly deep and accurate portrayal of humanity. There were times when he didn't really know what was going on, but he still managed to have fun." Although Shimoku only gives the vaguest of glimpses of the overtly titillating and provocative material that other 16+ mangas (like *Pastel* and *Gacha Gacha*) enjoyed by the boys, he doesn't shy away from acknowledging the inevitable results. "I'm sorry. It looks like we'll have to stop here. Goodbye! Goodbye!"

As the months pass, we see relationships within the group fluctuate and deepen; there is unrequited love here, as well as the possibilities of genuine partnerships. And Kanji Sasahara begins to show his potential; could he be the one to rescue the *Genshiken* from its comfortable state of stagnation?

Shimoku could have made *Genshiken* a brash, knockabout send-up of otaku stereotypes, but instead he has woven a perceptive and likeable comedy of manners set on campus in contemporary Japan. The members of the *Genshiken* may not manage to live up to the qualities they admire in their fictional heroes but there is much to enjoy in this unusual and insightful series.

Volume 5 is due out on 25 April 2006

Sarah Ash's latest novel is *Children of the Serpent Gate* (Book Three of *The Tears of Artamon*), published by Bantam Press at £10.99



"Stop! You're going the wrong way!" Del Rey's manga books are presented in the traditional Japanese way, from right to left, starting at what would otherwise be the back

Genshiken (The Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture)

Kio Shimoku • Del Rey Manga, Books 1–4, \$10.95 pb

a new member arrives, the dark-haired and generously proportioned Kanako Ohno, who although rather shy and retiring, has a penchant for cosplay. Suddenly Saki-san has competition – and when the group suggests that she might like to dress up too, even her steely determination begins to waver.

Anyone who has ever joined a college society or club will find plenty to amuse here in this understated yet wickedly accurate series. The young men's obsession with 'anime porn', especially in interactive PC games, magazines and fanzines, is a recurring theme. Saki Kasukabe is at first horrified and then confused to learn that her fresh-faced boyfriend Kousaka has a vast collection of these games. "Even back in the Edo era they had erotic Shunga prints," Madaramé points out defensively. "Okay then, tell me straight," she says to the club members, ignoring Madaramé. "Do any of you have any interest at all in real women?"

There are delightfully observed moments too. The boys of the Genshiken interpret the world in terms of anime and manga, so that when they hear how Saki and Kousaka first met, they can hardly hide their delight. "Y-you mean you're the 'Girl-Next-Door' character?" stammers Kugayama. "Wow. They really do exist." Which only provokes Saki into the riposte, "Why do you guys have to be so *otaku* about everything?"

It soon becomes obvious that the Genshiken has been stagnating for some while, led by an almost invisible President (vaguely described as an older student of indeterminate age) and looked on with contempt by the Manga and Anime Clubs. To make matters worse, the members of the Genshiken fall foul of Kitagawa, the officious vice-president of the campus activities organization, and find that their society has been included in a list of clubs to be dissolved 'due to inactivity'. An unlikely ally stands up for them: Saki, who has taken an immediate dislike to the bossy Kitagawa for labelling her 'little *otaku*'.

Shimoku usually adds an illuminating little envoi at the end of each chapter, 'Moments Later', with titles like 'Guys Will Say Anything' or 'A Blizzard of Details'. Interspersed throughout Book One are whole-page profiles of the members of the Genshiken, including their blood groups. (In Japanese popular culture, these are often used to determine what type of personality you have, much as Western readers use horoscopes, for example: Kousaka and

In the West, we've borrowed the term *otaku* from the Japanese to describe a keen fan of anime and manga. But in Japan it has a far stronger meaning: nerd; obsessive; geek – and not usually in a good way. Freshman Saki Kasukabe has a problem: her boyfriend, good-looking Makoto Kousaka, is a total *otaku* – and she is not; she can't see what all the fuss is about. So when he joins the Genshiken at the college society fair, she is far from delighted; she can think of much better things for the two of them to do together than sitting around with a "bunch of losers." Yet, Saki is so secretly proud of snaring such a desirable catch as 'bishi' Kousaka that she finds herself drawn – against her will and better judgement – into the activities of the Genshiken. And her acerbic presence soon turns the Genshiken upside-down.

Genshiken is Kio Shimoku's wittily observed take on the everyday lives of the student members of a small college society. Sometimes we observe them through Saki's unsympathetic eyes, sometimes through the viewpoint of freshman Kanji Sasahara, another potential recruit. At his first meeting, Kanji is surprised to find himself left alone in the clubroom as, one by one, the other members are called away. Surrounded by shelves spilling over with manga, magazines, models, action figures and DVDs, he begins to browse. "There's gotta be some porn around here." Sure enough, he soon finds a stash of fanzines and, eyes widening, begins to leaf through them...only to be caught red-handed by the other members returning en masse. "You know we've been watching you the whole time," confides Harunobu Madaramé, winding the mortified Sasahara up even more. "Don't take it personally," says the genial Tanaka, the group's cosplay expert. "We do this every year and everyone falls for it." "They got me last year," adds softly spoken Kugayama, the only artist in the Genshiken. "I guess," says Madaramé slyly, "that means you're one of us! So why don't you just join up?"

Shimoku's manga follows Kanji as the sophomores take him to Akihabara, the electronics paradise, and to comic conventions where they initiate him into the rigours of standing in line with the thousands of other fans, all eager to get their hands on the latest merchandise (especially the *doujinshi*, or fanzines, written and drawn by other *otaku*).

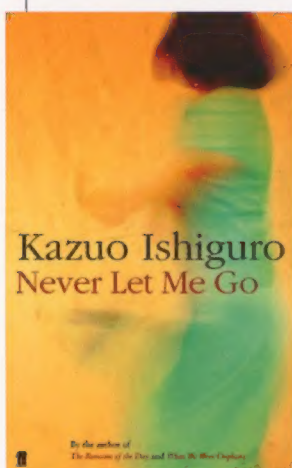
And as for the scornful Saki Kasukabe... even though she still hangs around the Genshiken, her nose is put out of joint when

Sasahara are Type B and therefore 'outgoing, optimistic and adventurous', whereas Madaramé is Type O, which suggests a 'workaholic, insecure and emotional' profile.) Also listed are the members' favourite mangas, games and animes. This gives Kio Shimoku the opportunity to gently hint at well-known series without naming them precisely and (presumably) risking lawsuits. However, the guys in the Genshiken all adore 'Kujibiki Unbalance'; a manga within the manga, concocted very convincingly by Rio Shimoku. There are character profiles, detailed comments from the fans using their *otaku* pseudonyms ('72-Year-Old Pit Viper', 'Owl'), relationship maps... The character designs in 'Kujibiki Unbalance' have the large, expressive eyes and cute expressions most commonly found in *shoujo* manga art. And now that *Genshiken* itself has been made into an anime (not yet licensed for release in the UK, but here's hoping), it's no surprise to learn that there is an accompanying OAV with three whole episodes of 'Kujibiki Unbalance' to enjoy.

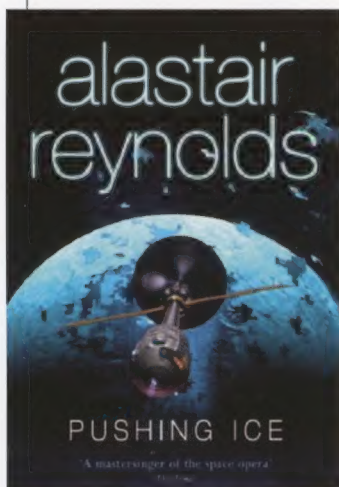
David Ury, who has translated and adapted the original text, adds helpful explanatory notes at the back of each volume that illuminate some of the cultural references which might puzzle a Western audience.

Genshiken does not set out to offer the heady thrills afforded by the manga titles

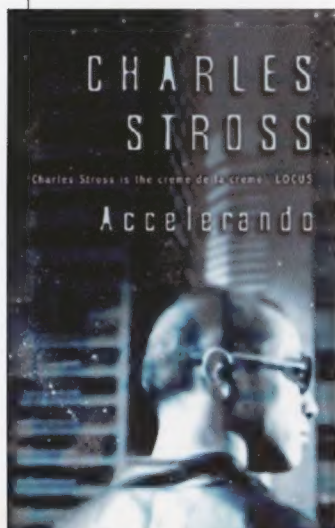
the arthur c. clarke award



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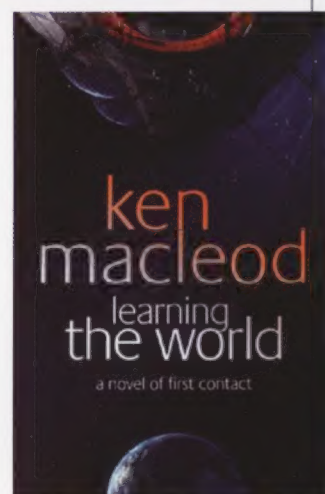
The winner of the
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prestigious science fiction award —
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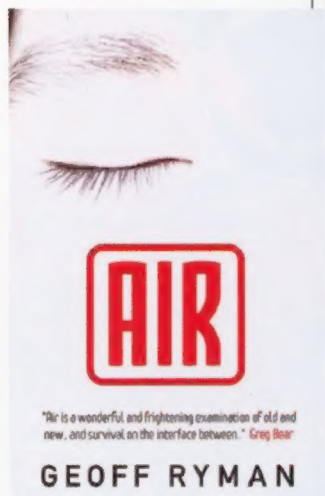
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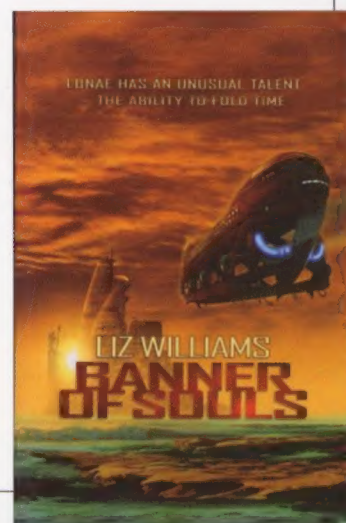
The Arthur C. Clarke Award is administered by the Serendip Foundation
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LEARNING THE WORLD
Ken MacLeod
Orbit

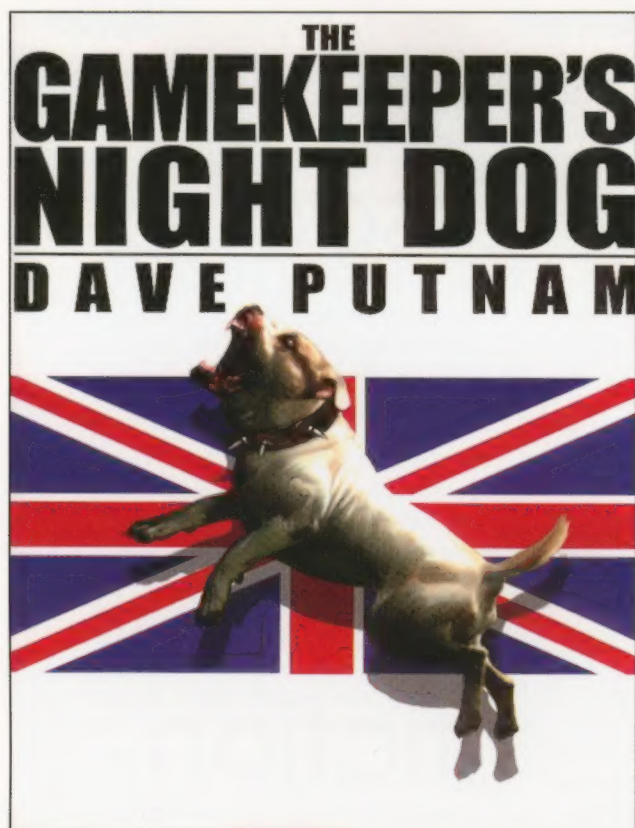


AIR
Geoff Ryman
Gollancz



BANNER OF SOULS
Liz Williams
Tor

A New Kind of Science Fiction—Rooted in Alternative History



Novel 1: *The Gamekeeper's Night Dog*. Britain's world straddling empire reached its apogee immediately prior to the actual Boer War. At that time, it occupied 25 % of the Earth's land and dominated every ocean. The island's manufacturing capability represented 50% of the planet's total. In banking, insurance, global reserve currency status, military technology, by any measure, late 19th century Britain was the globe's unrivaled superpower. But the actual Boer War changed all that, sending the colossus into decline and weakening it prior to the outbreak of WW I. *The Gamekeeper's Night Dog* is an alternative history of the Boer War where Britain's drive toward world dominance is accelerated rather than reversed. Packs of English Bulldogs fight alongside Zulu warriors to deliver a decisive triumph to Queen Victoria's forces, irrevocably altering the course of history.

Novel 2: *The World War*. The story continues as Britain is invigorated by its assimilation of the two Boer Republics and the reordering of its African empire. Awash in new military technology, buttressed by an alliance with the mighty country of Zululand, and armed with divine foreknowledge that global conflict is inevitable, it attacks Germany, Czarist Russia, and the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 19th Century. WW I technology morphs into WW II technology and then into something else entirely. Packs of land mine equipped war dogs fight alongside panzers on land; in the North Sea, sea lions destroy U-boats with magnetic mines.

Novel 3: *10 Downing Street*. Set in the 1940s, this is an alternative history of the Cold War, but it is barely recognizable as such because the world's timeline has diverged over the course of a half century. A one-world government is centered in London. Only a civil war can threaten the planet's stability. Unfortunately, the growth of monopoly capitalism provides the impetus for just such an internecine conflict. Communist insurgents explode from their Hawaiian stronghold to wreak military and economic havoc. The theme of animal warriors is continued and expanded. Sign language speaking gorillas join man's conflict.

Novel 4: *Britain Uber Alles*. Set in the 29th century, Britain's one world government has enjoyed centuries of peace, all the while preparing for a prophesied interstellar war, which explodes across the galaxy ahead of schedule. This novel will be available February 2006.

All four novels are available on Amazon.com or www.workingamericanbulldog.com